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AUTHOR	Rademacher, Ida; Bear, Marshall; Conway, Maureen
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ABSTRACT

Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training) was begun in 1992 to provide unemployed and working poor residents of San Antonio, Texas, with employment training and job placement services. The program provides tuition subsidies and ancillary support services to low-income San Antonio residents enrolled in two-year associate's degree and one-year certificate programs at local community colleges. Project QUEST underwrites occupation-specific degrees in fields that are in high demand in the San Antonio labor market and offer family-supporting wages. Project QUEST is based on a case management approach in which counselors/case managers work with participants to develop a package of "wrap-around" services to help them get through training and transition to work. Project QUEST's initiatives include a work force development academy, basic education training, and customized training and mobility programs. Project QUEST has developed a sophisticated management information system to track program-related and participant-related outcomes and information. In 1998-1999, Project QUEST

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spent an average of $8,094 per graduate and $6,847 per placement. In 1999, 72.4% of program graduates were placed in jobs at an average placement wage of $8.97/hour. Project QUEST has demonstrated that sectoral strategies are highly effective when used to inform regional approaches to work force development. (Contains 14 tables/figures.) (MN)

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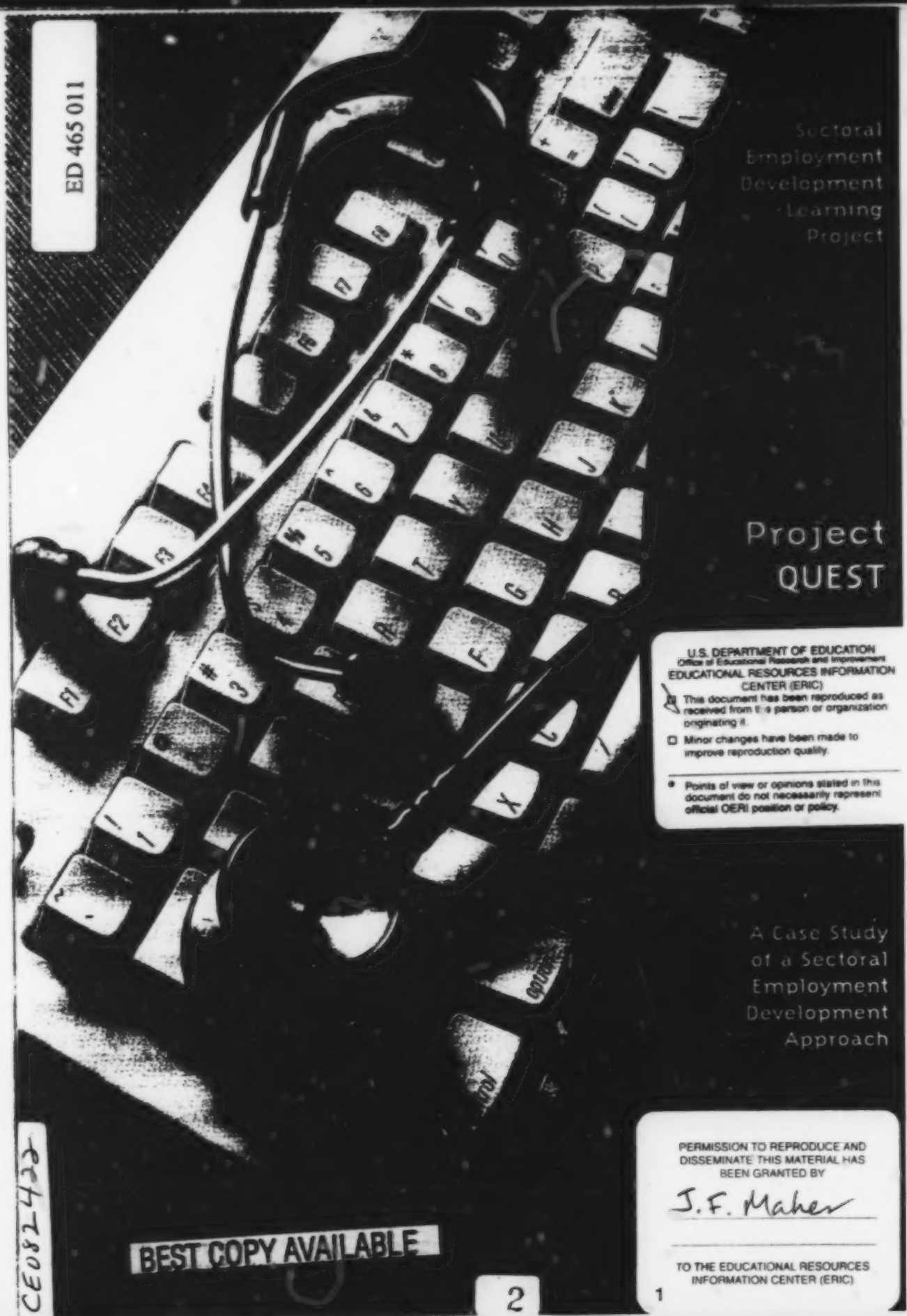

Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project

Project QUEST

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A Case Study of a Sectoral Employment Development Approach

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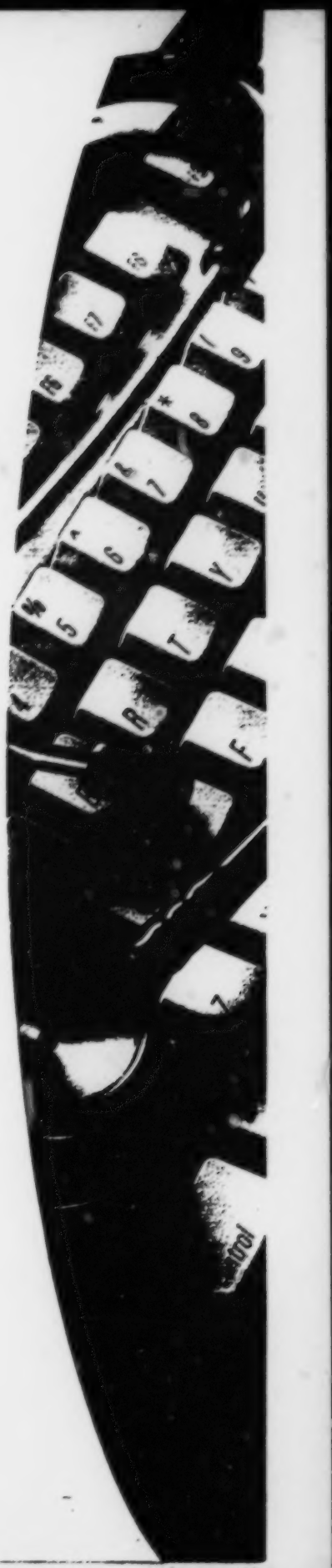
Project QUEST

A Case Study of a Sectoral Employment Development Approach

Ida Rademacher
Marshall Bear
Maureen Conway



August 2001

Economic Opportunities Program
The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036

The Sectoral Studies

This case study is the fifth in the SEDLP Case Studies Series of six sectoral studies to be published by the Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project of the Economic Opportunities Program of the Aspen Institute. The purpose of these case studies is to provide an in-depth look at individual sectoral employment development programs and their interaction within distinct economic and industry environments. The sectoral studies offer policy makers and practitioners insights on issues involved in operating a sectoral intervention.

Although each case study will explore a particular program in a specific industry sector and regional context, all will answer the same key research questions and use a common research format. The methodology relies on primary data collection through interviews with program staff, program participants, local employers and other key actors such as union representatives, public officials and industry association leaders. That information is supplemented by the analysis of internal program documents and financial statements and limited use of secondary source materials.

The Sectoral Studies are made possible through the support of the Mott, Ford and Annie E. Casey foundations.

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The mission of Project QUEST is to demonstrate the social and economic benefits that can be achieved through long-term training for those who otherwise would not have the opportunity ...
— Project QUEST mission statement

Project QUEST (Quality Employment Through Skills Training) was begun in 1992 to provide unemployed and working poor residents of San Antonio, Texas, with a new type of employment training and job placement service. The program provides tuition subsidies and ancillary support services to low-income San Antonio residents while they are enrolled in two-year associate's degree and one-year certificate programs at local community colleges. The degrees QUEST underwrites are occupation-specific, and QUEST selects which degrees it will support, choosing those that are in high demand in the San Antonio labor market and that offer family-supporting wages.

QUEST was formed to address the acute skills mismatch that emerged as the city's economic base began shifting from manufacturing to service- and technology-driven industries.

QUEST was formed to address the acute skills mismatch that emerged as the city's economic base began shifting from manufacturing to service- and technology-driven industries. In the new economy, jobs were becoming increasingly divided between those that required specialized skills and those that did not. While 14,000 manufacturing jobs were lost during a 10-year period, more than 19,000 new jobs were created. Many of these paid well, but they required skills and expertise that were in short supply among the city's working poor.

For people who lacked advanced skills — and the resources needed to acquire them — the work and wages they could obtain were incapable of supporting a family, and there were very few paths to advancement. QUEST was designed to bridge the gap between skill and opportunity.

Through employer-backed and occupation-targeted long-term training methods, QUEST began to help both businesses and low-income individuals identify and achieve employment outcomes that suited their needs. Over the years, QUEST has altered some of the criteria it uses to identify, select and provide training for "demand occupations," a term that refers to jobs in the local economy that are hard to fill and that provide sufficient pay, benefits and career mobility. What has not changed is QUEST's focus on helping underemployed and unemployed residents achieve self-sufficiency through long-term training and customized, intensive case management.

Project QUEST as a Sectoral Initiative

Project QUEST has training tracks for numerous occupations within multiple industries. This multi-sector strategy is different from most sectoral initiatives, which tend to concentrate on improving employment opportunities and quality of employment within a single industry or occupation. Four characteristics commonly used to identify sectoral initiatives are presented below,[1] along with brief explanations of ways in which QUEST adheres to and diverges from this model.

- **Targets a particular occupation or set of occupations within an industry.** QUEST currently targets three industry sectors: (1) health services, (2) business systems/information technology and (3) maintenance, repair and overhaul. QUEST sponsors several training tracks within each sector. Occupations are targeted based on their demand by local firms. Selection criteria also include wage rate, availability of benefits and career mobility potential. One benefit of a multi-sector approach is that QUEST can offer a wider range of occupational training and employment choices to its low-income participants, enabling it to assist a larger and more diverse pool of individuals. However, the approach raises the question of how deeply embedded QUEST can — or must — become within each industry to be effective.
- **Intervenes by becoming a valued actor with the industry that employs that occupation.** A growing number of San Antonio employers think of QUEST as a valuable extension of their human resource capabilities. QUEST's efforts to develop local talent to fill demand occupations reduce costly employee recruitment and turnover. In some cases, QUEST's occupational analysis has helped employers restructure positions to make them more attractive to local workers. QUEST also has performed return on investment calculations to show how an investment in targeted training for low-skilled workers contributes to the long-term health of the local economy.
- **Works toward creating systemic change within that occupation's labor market.** The change QUEST has spawned resides first and foremost at community and labor market system

[1] For an explanation see Peggy Clark and Steven L. Dawson, *Jobs and the Urban Poor: Privately Initiated Sectoral Strategies*, The Aspen Institute: Washington, D.C., November 1995.

levels. Its efforts to create access to promising career paths for San Antonio's poor have been accomplished primarily through improvements in linking employers and community colleges. In addition, QUEST has changed the way the community college approaches remedial skills development, facilitating easier access to degree-granting programs for those who first need basic skills education. Project QUEST and its community partners also have influenced local and state government officials to address and support human development and skill building activities as part of an overall sound economic development policy.

QUEST's occupational approach can change as the local economy evolves. This is somewhat more opportunistic than sectoral initiatives that operate within a single industry or occupational context. Because of this, there may be questions about how permanent or pivotal a role QUEST plays in shaping an industry's demand for — or compensation of — labor. However, if QUEST can be criticized for lacking industry embeddedness because of its broad reach across sectors, it can be praised for helping the city understand the importance of investing in human development to create a prosperous future.

- **Exists for the primary purpose of assisting low-income people to obtain decent employment.** Despite San Antonio's low unemployment rates of the 1990s, more than 22 percent of residents continue to live in poverty. QUEST structures training to address the financial and social needs of the working poor as they participate in occupational training. All QUEST participants must be economically disadvantaged, and almost half receive some form of public assistance. QUEST supports training only for career tracks that can lead to self-sufficiency, and the average wage earned by a program graduate in 1999 was almost $10 per hour.

Case Study Organization

This case study was researched and written to show how a program that emerges from a context that is not industry-specific

can nonetheless use sectoral strategies to inform and improve a city's approach to workforce development.

Section 1 begins by describing Project QUEST's origins and providing an overview of its participants and the program structure and strategy. It also explores the key collaborations and funding relationships that make it possible for QUEST to accomplish its mission.

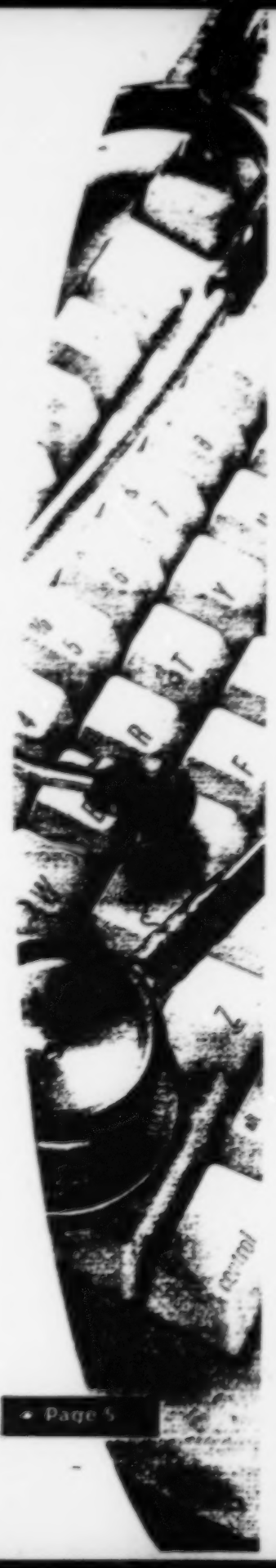
Section 2 outlines some of the labor market and industry dynamics in San Antonio that spawned — and continue to inform and direct — QUEST's training and research efforts. Some of the advantages and challenges of working in multiple sectors also are explored here.

Section 3 discusses the role of Project QUEST's Occupational Development unit and demonstrates how QUEST operates as a labor market intermediary for employers in some of San Antonio's high-growth industries, especially health care and information technology.

Section 4 considers the core attributes of the QUEST training strategy relative to helping students develop both work and life skills. It reviews the participant training process from recruitment to placement and retention. It also describes the training tiers QUEST has developed so that it may serve a variety of participants with different aptitudes, interests and employment needs.

Section 5 examines QUEST's program costs and outcomes as they relate to training, placement and retention. Early in its development, QUEST designed its own Applicant Information Management (AIM) system to track participant progress and outcomes. In addition to relating program outcomes, this section discusses QUEST's experiences with moving its management information system beyond data tracking and making it an integrated and fundamental aspect of internal management and communication.

Section 6 discusses the challenges QUEST faces going forward, and the lessons it has learned to date about collaboration, building to scale, and achieving systemic change in the local labor market.



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In our approach to our work, we have two target customers. We have the participant, and then we have the employer. Our job is to bridge the gap between the two ... Our staff — not just our occupational analysts, but everyone — become experts in the industries we work in.

- Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

...Over time, a shared belief about the importance of training, accountability and self-sufficiency has informed decision-making at QUEST...

The idea sounds simple enough: Help people who need good jobs find employers who need good workers, and achieve this by helping people who struggle economically to acquire the skills that employers value. The difficulty, of course, is translating the idea into practice. How does a program produce win-win outcomes for two seemingly disparate customers? Can one program successfully and simultaneously address the problems of poverty and business competitiveness?

So begins the story of Project QUEST, the brainchild of two community-based organizations determined to stave off increasing poverty and unemployment in San Antonio. The two organizations — Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance — are affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation. Working together, they developed an employment training program for the economically disadvantaged that challenged local officials to rethink the role that human development plays in a city's economic development strategy.

QUEST represented a real turning point in San Antonio's approach to workforce development in the way that workforce is conceived of and funded. QUEST is funded primarily through local government dollars, and city officials clearly think of QUEST's contributions to training and human development as part of a larger economic development strategy. QUEST acts as the honest broker, investing city funds directly in people with low skills and low income, and putting pressure on the existing educational institutions to provide the caliber of training that employers demand. Through its work, QUEST contributes to raising the city's standard of living and quality of life. At the same time, it enhances the city's ability to attract and retain businesses that rely on a skilled workforce.

It would be an overstatement to credit QUEST's success to a planned and enacted program strategy. It is more accurate to say that over time, a shared belief about the importance of training, accountability and self-sufficiency has informed decisionmaking at

QUEST under various leaders. As Executive Director Mary Peña reflects on QUEST's development, she explains: "QUEST has not evolved according to a particular methodology per se. We just deliberately did what needed doing. It is nebulous to say that our program is about mission or relationships or strategy. It has really been about people and about creating and taking advantage of opportunities."

The program that exists today, therefore, is a work in progress. It continues to evolve based on "what needs doing," given the prevailing economic conditions and the needs of San Antonio's poor.

Included in this section are a brief overview of Project QUEST's origins and a discussion of some of the most notable characteristics of QUEST's people and program philosophy. This discussion is intended to illuminate the niche Project QUEST has created for itself in local economic development and employment and training spheres. In addition, it will review QUEST's core competencies and suggest reasons for the program's sustained success in achieving its goals.

Origins of Project QUEST

When Levi Strauss, Inc. closed its San Antonio factory in 1990, displacing 1,000 Latina women employees, it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The "camel" in this case was the local pool of jobs that provided decent wages to people with limited education, skills and mastery of English. The Levi Strauss "straw" was the latest in a series of factory closings that was eroding the manufacturing base of the city — a base that had historically provided many high school-educated workers with lifelong careers that supported and sustained families.

Many of the dislocated workers came from neighborhoods and faith-based communities that were active in two Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate organizations[2] — Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance. COPS and Metro Alliance leaders, led by the Rev. Al Jost, recognized how the decreasing ability of low-skilled workers to find good jobs would have profound implications for families, communities and the city at large. In response, they began to research trends in the local economy to see if anything could be done.

[2]The Industrial Areas Foundation is a national network of about 40 community- and church-based organizations. It emphasizes local leadership and organizing as strategies to empower low-income communities and improve government accountability on issues including education, infrastructure, housing and jobs. The IAF has 11 chapters in Texas. San Antonio's COPS — founded by Ernesto Cortes, Jr., in 1974 — is one of the oldest, largest and most respected and successful community organizations in the country.

In the early 1990s, it was generally believed that San Antonio was losing all of its good jobs. But when COPS and Metro Alliance began to analyze the city's economic trends, they learned that job creation was far surpassing job loss, and that a sizable number of the new jobs were high-wage and high-skill. The problem for poor San Antonians was not a lack of jobs; it was a lack of training opportunities to secure good jobs. COPS and Metro Alliance leaders began to investigate the training options that existed in San Antonio, and the ability of these programs to meet the training needs of the city's poor population.

As part of this assessment, COPS and Metro Alliance also conducted hundreds of house meetings and listened to people's stories and experiences with work and training. They learned that people were eager to acquire skills and education that would result in better jobs and higher pay. However, they lacked the time, information and money necessary to pursue this objective. In addition, many people were soured by previous experiences with job training programs. Some were still paying for courses that failed to prepare them for, or connect them to, real jobs. Many were put off by the dismissive way that agencies and job training programs dealt with them.

By really listening to both employers and low-income workers, and by assessing the city's existing capacity to perform skills training, COPS and Metro Alliance were able to accurately size up the employment problem in the city and build support for a new approach to training based on four key principles:

- The program must tie in strongly with the occupational demands of local employers.
- The program must be selective and target training only for those careers that offer good pay and advancement opportunities ("demand occupations").
- The program must incorporate intensive client services to help economically disadvantaged participants overcome financial and personal barriers to skill acquisition.
- The program must leverage training resources already in the community.

COPS and Metro Alliance initially designed Project QUEST as a two-year demonstration project, for which they won political and financial support from city, state and federal agencies. The goal

of the demonstration was to train 600 individuals to fill quality, career-track jobs, thus proving that long-term, occupation-specific training could yield positive results for everyone invested in the program — participants, employers, the city and other fund providers.

QUEST has been "demonstrating" its approach to workforce development since 1993, and has helped more than 1,200 economically disadvantaged residents prepare for careers, self-sufficiency and a better life. In recent years, QUEST has become a nationally recognized model for workforce development, and has been replicated in four other cities in the Southwest, three of which are also in Texas.[1]

Staffing and Student Characteristics

From the beginning, QUEST paid particularly close attention to recruiting both staff and students who exhibit certain types of qualities. Some of the relevant criteria and characteristics of both groups are discussed below.

Project QUEST Staff

The original staff was put together with one thing in mind: that they did NOT have the baggage that comes with working in other job training programs. ... We wanted people who could think outside of the box.

-Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

I have worked in many places, but this is the first where the staff is this dedicated. I can stop any one of them, at any time, to ask about any student, and they know.

-Linda Caraway, director of Client Services, Project QUEST

We are very customer-oriented. We treat everyone how we want to be treated, respectfully and conscientiously. Participants notice. They say they have never been treated like this.

-Felipe Tamez, senior counselor, Project QUEST

When San Antonians told COPS and Metro Alliance about their negative experiences with existing job training programs and social service agencies, the message had a strong impact. As a result, QUEST was set up as an employment and training program that looked and felt different from the others from start to finish.

[1]The other programs are Capital IDEA, Austin, Texas; VIDA, Harlingen, Texas; Project ARRIBA, El Paso, Texas; and JobPath, Tucson, Ariz.

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Much of the reason for this difference is because of the attitudes and philosophy of the staff.

In QUEST's start-up phase, COPS and Metro Alliance hired an executive director whose experience and management style were somewhat uncharacteristic for job training programs that serve the poor. Jack Salvadore was a retired U.S. Air Force general and former commander of the USAF Recruiting Service. QUEST's second director, Jim Lund, came from a similar military background. Both men had extensive experience in systems creation and organizational development. They recruited many staff members — counselors, case managers and occupational analysts — who also were former military personnel. The staff infused the culture of QUEST with a working style that emphasizes self-reliance and accountability.

The majority of QUEST's participants — roughly 70 percent — are Hispanic, and 75 percent are women, many of whom are single mothers.

Project QUEST's staff was shocked in 1998 when Lund died. However, the systems and structures he put in place enabled the organization to continue to operate smoothly, despite the loss of the popular leader. Lund's replacement and current executive director, Mary Peña, is a longtime member of the QUEST case management staff. Along with Peña, about one-third of Project QUEST's staff members began working with the project in its first year of operation. Peña credits QUEST's sustained success to the staff's continuity and dedication to empowering participants to succeed.

Peña also attributes the high staff retention rate to QUEST's commitment to pay wages comparable to those in the private sector. She explains her strategy: "You cannot draw professional people to your staff if you pay nonprofit wages. It does not matter how compelling the mission is, the bottom line is that if we do not compensate people for what they are really worth, we get into the trap where people are coming to work but leaving a lot of their energy and talent at home."

Participants

I am looking forward to financial freedom. I am in debt right now, robbing Peter to pay Paul. I cannot wait to have a good job and the funds to put braces on my daughter's teeth — to have health insurance. I would love to have a car that starts and a roof that does not leak.

- Project QUEST registered nursing student

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I applied for help from other training programs and they turned me down and said that I was making too much. I wondered how, because I was not even working at the time, but they said my wife was making money. I asked, 'How poor do you have to be to get help?' And they said you have to be really poor. I do not know how much poorer we could be, but they turned me down, they would not help me out.

- Project QUEST computer network administration student

Since its inception, QUEST has expanded the number of students it works with each year. In 1999, it served about 600 students. In 2000, it served 700, and the target number in 2001 is 843. Each participant's story is unique, and yet there are many similarities. Although typical QUEST participants face immense financial and personal challenges, they are not, in general, standing on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. In a sense, many are in a frustrating but increasingly common bind in America — too rich to get help from most training programs, but too poor to be able to come up with either the time or money to get ahead on their own.

People who enroll in QUEST must demonstrate economic need. Rather than use the federally defined poverty level as its guideline, however, QUEST defines economically disadvantaged individuals as people whose income is less than 50 percent of the median income for the city's population. In 1999, for example, the threshold was $18,850 for a family of three.[4] Even so, more than 65 percent of QUEST enrollees fall below 150 percent of U.S. poverty guidelines, and 50 percent receive some sort of public assistance such as housing subsidies, welfare or food stamps. Almost 80 percent were unemployed at some point during the year they applied to the program.[5]

The majority of QUEST's participants — roughly 70 percent — are Hispanic, and 75 percent are women, many of whom are single mothers.[6] The participant profile is changing somewhat, however, as QUEST begins to expand enrollment and offer more types of training. More young applicants, as well as married women, and married and single men, are applying to the program. Eighty per-

[4]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research, 15 June 2001 (Online. Internet. Available: http://www.huduser.org/datasets/il/fmr99rev/hud99revtx.txt) Less than 50 percent of the area median income is the same criteria the Department of Housing and Urban Development uses as its very low-income guideline.
[5]From The Aspen Institute's Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project 1998 Program Monitoring Profile. This data is self-reported by participating programs.
[6]Ibid.

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cent are between the ages of 20 and 40. Many have some work experience, but in general, employment experiences have been sporadic and have not led to career or income mobility. Data collected in QUEST's Applicant Information Management system shows that 44 percent of students who enter Project QUEST worked for one month or less in the six months before enrollment.

Maria's Story

Maria is a single, 45-year-old Mexican immigrant who has lived in the United States for eight years. Maria has earned her living in the United States primarily as a domestic worker and a caregiver. Although she completed high school, she lacks the work and language skills necessary to find more lucrative jobs. She enrolled in Project QUEST to become a licensed vocational nurse.

In the year before joining Project QUEST, Maria worked more than 50 hours per week at three jobs, with wages ranging from $4.75 to $6.25 per hour, and her personal income totaled $12,134. She had no health insurance. After completing training through Project QUEST, Maria found work as an LVN at a nursing home with benefits and a $10.50 per hour wage. She was unhappy with the working conditions, however, and transferred quickly to a position at a rehabilitation clinic where she is paid $10.50 per hour to administer medications and monitor residents. She has also taken on a weekend position as a nurse at an AIDS treatment facility that pays $12.50 per hour plus benefits. She likes the weekend job more than her main job because she feels she is getting better opportunities to practice her nursing skills.

In addition to holding two jobs, Maria is already enrolled in an advanced chemistry class at San Antonio College that will count toward her registered nursing degree course requirements. She plans to complete her registered nursing degree as quickly as possible. When she looks back at what she's accomplished during the past two years, Maria explains that she feels she is living "another life" than the one she used to have. "I was doing another kind of job, and now I have a new life."

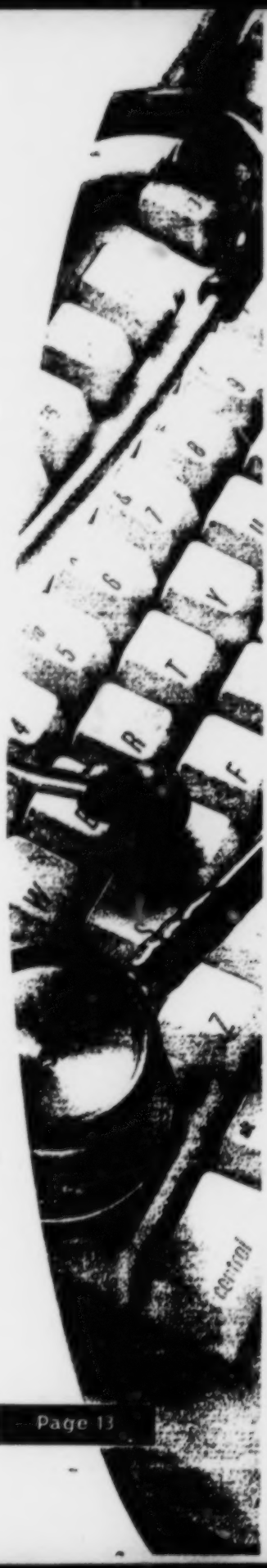
Economic need is not the only criteria for enrolling participants. QUEST also requires that its students complete high school or obtain a General Education Development equivalent, and that they have a good grasp of the English language. Staff members also look for some degree of emotional and social stability in applicants. This is not to say that individuals have no problems, but it does mean that they are not experiencing crippling addictions or personal crises that would make it impossible to commit to the program. Linda Caraway, director of Client Services, explains it this way: "We like for people to think through what they are getting ready to commit to and to identify any barriers. There are a lot of barriers we can help with. But some things — drug addiction, a messy divorce — really should be dealt with before starting a huge new commitment. We want people's expectations to be realistic. We hate to see them setting themselves up for failure."

Tiers of Training

Project QUEST partners with the Alamo Community College District (ACCD) to provide training that leads to accredited occupational certificates and associate's degrees. Although participants have a high school diploma or a GED, QUEST finds that many students need basic skills training in reading, writing and math before they can pass the college entrance exams required by the state of Texas and begin their course curriculum. ACCD provides remediation courses, but QUEST discovered over time that the courses were not suited to the special needs of QUEST participants or to the program's budgetary constraints. In an effort to address the problem, QUEST began to conceptualize a tiered training program that would take students from where they were to where they needed to be, skill-wise, to be admitted to degree-track courses.

The first training tier developed in partnership with ACCD was the Workforce Development Academy (WDA). WDA is an intensive program held on the college campus that is designed to raise participants' reading, writing and math skills from ninth-grade to 12th-grade levels in 10 weeks. Once participants complete the program and successfully retake the college entrance exams, they enroll in the occupation-specific course curriculum that was previously selected.

The success of WDA has recently led QUEST to develop a second tier of training designed to reach a group of applicants who,



despite a GED or high school diploma, display basic reading and math skills below a ninth-grade level. "These folks have been coming to QUEST all along," explains Caraway, Client Services director, "but we were never equipped to help them because our programs stopped at the ninth-grade level." The new Basic Education Training (BET) program was designed in collaboration with San Antonio Learning Centers to work with applicants to improve their skills from the sixth-grade to the ninth-grade level so they can move onto the college campus to enter the WDA.

QUEST also recently added customized training to its options so that it can deepen relationships with certain employers in the health care sector and serve those in San Antonio affected by the "work first" paradigm that accompanied welfare reform. QUEST also is exploring the feasibility of mobility training programs that would help establish industry-specific career ladders based on continuing education.

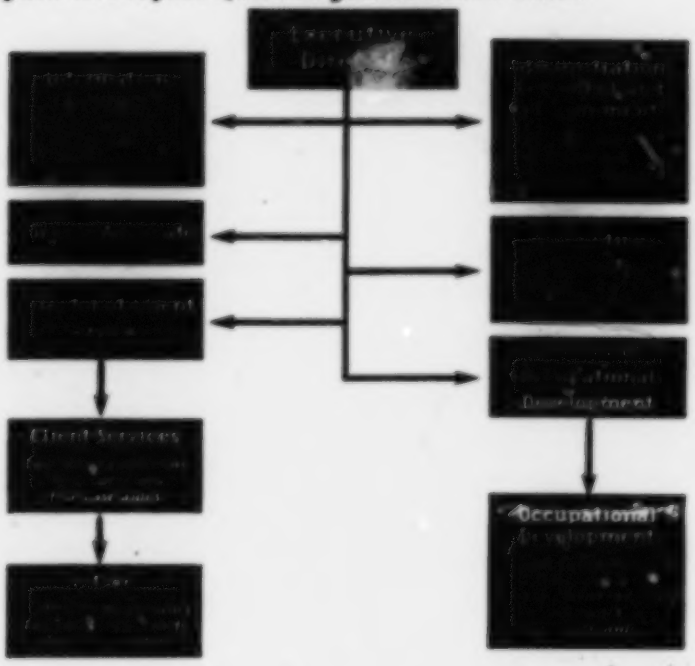
Organizational Features

Project QUEST is organized into five main units: Administration, Accounting, Information Management, Occupational Development and Client Services, as shown in Figure 1.1. Within these units, there are currently 38 full-time staff members. The structure and the positions in the organization reflect QUEST's service to two primary customer segments — employers in strategic sectors of the local economy, and participants from economically disadvantaged communities. Hence, Occupational Development and Client Services employ the majority of Project QUEST staff, and the two units form the heart of what Project QUEST does.

It is the Occupational Development unit's job to conduct labor market research that identifies industry-specific employment trends in San Antonio. Based on research findings, the staff makes recommendations about the types of industry and occupational focus that QUEST should incorporate into its participant training portfolio. Detailed information on the Occupational Development unit is provided in Section 3, Implementing A Sector Approach.

QUEST's Client Services unit works to connect the unemployed and working poor of San Antonio with the education and resources needed to obtain good jobs in targeted occupations. To do

Figure 1.1 Project QUEST Organizational Chart



this, counselors and case managers integrate the research and recommendations from the Occupational Development team into a service strategy that generates motivated, reliable and competent program graduates that will be in high demand in the labor market. The details of the Client Services unit are discussed in Section 5.

Project QUEST's innovative Information Services unit has developed a unique management information system that facilitates efficient transfer of information between departments, allowing individuals to work more efficiently and facilitating internal evaluations of organizational progress.

Key Relationships

Along with its internal strengths, QUEST's relationships with external partners also have significantly contributed to the program's effectiveness. In particular, there are three areas where partnerships have been critical to the program's success — funding, training and job development.

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Funding

Our unique funding stream allows us to do more for our participants than we could if we were supported strictly with federal funds.

- Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

Project QUEST's mix of funding sources is unique among employment and training programs, sectoral or otherwise. Of its current $3 million annual budget, the city of San Antonio underwrites more than half of the total with money from its general fund. No other employment and training program in San Antonio has developed a similar relationship with the city.

Project QUEST prepares participants for well-paying careers – including as diesel mechanics.

COPS and Metro Alliance initially secured the local financing during the design and planning phase of Project QUEST. COPS and Metro Alliance have continued to be heavily involved in yearly budget negotiations with the city ever since. "We are so fortunate," Peña explains. "We write proposals and do negotiations, but the big money is negotiated by our board members. Half of our board is comprised of COPS and Metro Alliance leaders. The other half is made up of local business leaders. COPS and Metro Alliance are constantly meeting with the city council to explain QUEST's importance and its budget needs. On the other side, we have our business leaders calling the mayor, and the mayor will take their calls. So the city's government is getting pressure to support us in two different ways — from the community and from business leaders."

Local funding is one of the primary reasons QUEST has been able to be innovative and adopt a flexible and comprehensive

program strategy. Along with the lobbying efforts of its board, QUEST also has developed ways to demonstrate to the city that its investment is worthwhile. QUEST's in-house Applicant Information Management system is used extensively to track participant outcomes and to demonstrate to the city that its investment in employment training is more than recouping itself in the long run in terms of increased tax revenue and decreased drains on other types of city-funded social services.

Training

We have become credible at all levels with the college, from chancellor to worker bee.

- Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

Almost all of QUEST's training is conducted through a partnership with the Alamo Community College District's (ACCD) four affiliate campuses. This relationship came about early in QUEST's development, when the ACCD was under attack for not serving the training needs of the local population, and for not being responsive to local employers.

The relationship that developed between QUEST and the ACCD was symbiotic. The ACCD needed to improve its performance within the community, and QUEST needed to ensure that its participants received training that prepared them for careers with local employers. QUEST's approach to dealing with the ACCD was similar to its strategy for dealing with participants: Make them accountable and help them develop to a standard that meets employers' needs. QUEST's early work with the ACCD helped revamp course curriculum for diesel mechanics and other programs that had not been meeting the needs of local employers.

More recently, as the ACCD has become more self-directed in working with local employers, the main way QUEST helps the community college is through recruitment. The population QUEST serves always has been under-represented at the community college. According to Dr. Homer Hayes, the ACCD's dean of workforce development, "If it were not for the wrap-around services that QUEST provides to its participants beyond tuition, my guess is that these students would not be here. QUEST is attracting a population that is problematic for us to reach. They are providing us and their

participants with a real benefit."

QUEST's relationship with the ACCD also was instrumental in the formation of the Workforce Development Academy. The academy has cut considerable time and cost from QUEST training, has improved in-program retention and has opened up the college to many community residents who were not otherwise represented.

Job Development

The other relationships integral to Project QUEST's sectoral strategy are the ones it develops with employers in the industry sectors for which it supports training. The two primary ways QUEST develops these relationships are through its Occupational Development unit and through participant placement. Section 3, Implementing a Sector Approach, presents the details of the ways in which the unit works with employers to develop and sustain productive relationships. The other way in which QUEST develops relationships with employers is simply through employer satisfaction with QUEST graduates. In the industry sectors such as information technology, where there are many small, diverse and loosely organized employers, one of the best ways to build relationships is to let students serve as ambassadors for the program. Ad hoc relationship building is hard to predict or plan, but it should not be overlooked as an important way to make inroads into hard-to-reach employment sectors in a local economy.

Obviously, we are a large, diverse and rapidly growing city. By all conventional economic indicators, this is a city that is doing well economically. Yet, just as obviously, San Antonio also is still a city with low skill levels and low incomes, some of the highest rates of illiteracy and the highest levels of poverty of any major city in America. When we compare ourselves to other cities instead of just to ourselves, we see that all of the prosperity we have experienced through the 1990s has changed these realities little if at all.

Mayor Howard W. Peak, city of San Antonio
(Excerpt from the 2000 State of the City address)

Project QUEST bases its work in the context of the local San Antonio labor market. Unlike sectoral programs that are firmly entrenched in one particular industry, the point of departure for Project QUEST is the dynamics and trends in the regional economy as a whole. The department at Project QUEST that is responsible for monitoring these trends and guiding the organization's choice of target occupations is the Occupational Development unit. This section provides background on the San Antonio labor market, and then investigates two specific sectors of the local economy that Project QUEST currently targets. Over time, QUEST targets multiple sectors, and has the flexibility to change the mix of sectors in which it works. This helps it stay current with changes in regional employment trends and opportunities. Having said that, when QUEST chooses to target a sector, it plans to be in that sector for a number of years. Health care, for example, has been an important sector for QUEST since its founding. Together, the health care and business systems sectors account for 74 percent of all participants QUEST has trained and placed.[7]

A Shifting Employment Base

San Antonio's labor market today is defined by diverging statistics. On one hand, the city is experiencing historically low unemployment rates — 3.2 percent in 1999 and 2.7 percent in 2000.[8] At the same time, the percentage of the population living in poverty has grown to 23 percent.[9] This 23 percent, combined with another portion of the population who earn above-poverty but below self-sufficiency wages, constitute what is known as the "working poor." Growing poverty amid growing employment suggests that many of

[7] Of 913 total placements, 435 were in the health sector and 240 were in the business systems/information technology sector.
[8] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
[9] 1990 U.S. Census Data.

the jobs San Antonio is creating are low-wage, low-skill positions. People are working, but a sizable minority is not earning enough to support themselves or their families.

For years, the San Antonio economy experienced growth of both high-pay, high-skill work and of low-skill jobs that paid decent wages in various public and private operations: Kelly Air Force Base, the Roeglein meat-packing plant, Miller Curtain, San Antonio Shoe, construction companies and the Levi Strauss factory. This started to change in the early 1980s when many manufacturing jobs began to leave the area. Longtime, large-scale employers such as Roeglein, Miller Curtain, San Antonio Shoe and Levi Strauss are gone. Kelly Air Force Base is closing. San Antonio lost more than 14,000 jobs in manufacturing, textiles, transportation, construction and other industrial occupations during the 1980s. At the same time, the city gained almost 19,000 relatively well-paying jobs in fields that demanded skills in industries such as health care, education, auto repair and legal research. Not all jobs coming to San Antonio were better than the ones that left, however; growth also occurred in low-wage, low-skill jobs in the tourism and service industries.

As manufacturing jobs migrated to Mexico and Central America, the city promoted itself as a tourist destination by using a mix of incentives, such as tax abatements, to attract investment. Currently, of the 10 most in-demand occupations in San Antonio, most are service jobs related directly or indirectly to the tourist industry. These occupations offer among the lowest starting wages — wages below the city's living wage benchmark of $8.50 per hour and well below the COPS-Metro Alliance living wage policy of $10 per hour.

Historically, the city's business and political leaders have promoted San Antonio as a city where wages are low. Yet, there is an increased recognition among political and business leaders that, for the types of businesses San Antonio wants to attract and retain, the availability of a skilled workforce is more important than the availability of low-wage labor.

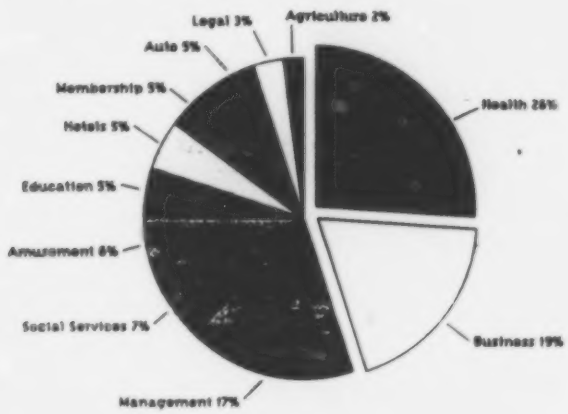
Top 10 Demand Occupations in San Antonio in 1999

- Housekeeping supervisors
- Sales representatives, except retail and scientific
- Food preparation workers
- Sales floor stock clerks
- Specialty fast food cooks
- Combined food preparation and service workers
- Non-farm wholesale and retail buyers
- Assemblers and fabricators, except machine and electrical
- Nursing aides, orderlies and attendants
- Veterinary technicians and technologists

Source: ERISS, Inc. Demand occupations are calculated by determining a hiring ratio for occupational titles, which is done by measuring new growth plus turnover divided by current workforce.

The service sector represents the single largest industrial division in San Antonio. In 1999, the service sector represented 31.9 percent of total wages paid, up from 27.2 percent at the beginning of the decade. Within the service sector, health and business services are the two largest employers with 26-percent and 19-percent shares of overall employment, respectively. The health care industry — which includes health-related services — accounted for 101,258 employees in San Antonio in 1998. The business services sector, which includes a range of subsectors including telemarketing, call centers, computer software and information technology, accounted for roughly 53,000 jobs in 1998. In 1999, the business services sector experienced five percent job growth and health services lost two percent of its total jobs. The loss of jobs primarily affected acute care facilities as major hospital systems restructured because of changes in Medicare and managed care reimbursements.

Figure 2.1 Service Sector Employment



Targeted Sectors – Health Services and Business Systems/Information Technology

Labor market conditions not only determine the industries and occupations where QUEST works, but also influence the types of relationships and strategies QUEST develops to work effectively within each targeted sector. A large part of Project QUEST's work as it relates to San Antonio's labor market is to identify and overcome the challenges associated with developing industry-specific and market-relevant training tracks that prepare low-income workers for good jobs.

Evidence from other case studies in this series suggests that single-sector workforce development programs play complex roles within their targeted industry.[10] Project QUEST compounds the degree of complexity by embracing an intermediary role in multiple sectors simultaneously. Some of the challenges associated with working in multiple sectors are illustrated below by contrasting the local dynamics of San Antonio's health services and business systems/information technology industries. Both of these industries contain a large number of jobs that offer living wages and career advancement opportunities. In addition, employers in both sectors are having difficulty finding sufficient qualified candidates. As mentioned earlier, these two sectors make up the majority of

[10] See the other five publications in this SEDLP Case Study Series, available from the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program.

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QUEST's training opportunities: Seventy-four percent of QUEST participants have trained for jobs in these sectors since the program's inception. But whereas employer demand and job opportunities are great in both sectors, the training and partnership challenges QUEST confronts in each industry are markedly different. Characteristics of the two sectors — size, structure, pace of change and skill certification requirements — present QUEST with different challenges in managing its training model. Figure 2.2 summarizes the similarities and differences between the two sectors.

As Emil Friesenhahn, executive director of Quantam Southwest Medical Management, explains, "You are stepping into one of the most dynamic, changing occupations you will ever go into when you enter the health field, and that means you have to be ready to do tomorrow something totally different than you are prepared to do today." As it is in other parts of the country, the health care sector in San Antonio is highly competitive and undergoes constant yet incremental changes because of the regulated nature of the industry and the policy changes that influence the way health care services are provided and paid for. Changes in technology also affect the practice of health care, so the skills required for performing specific types of work effectively change over time. As existing job titles and skill sets evolve and new ones are added to the mix, the level of knowledge required for entry and advancement in the health care sector changes in line with employer needs and industry trends.

Despite the changing skill aptitudes required by employers, there is a reasonably good match in the health services sector between college-based training and job titles because all professional-level health sector positions require accreditation and certification from state licensing boards. Employers in the health sector all use the state board's defined standards and credentials as the basis for defining skill requirements for their nursing positions.

The health sector in San Antonio is structured such that a relatively small number of businesses employ a large percentage of the city's credentialed health workers. The consolidated structure of the sector makes it possible for QUEST to capture labor-market knowledge from relatively few key sources. In addition, QUEST can achieve economies of scale in placing health care-track participants

Figure 2.2

Sector characteristics	Health services	Business systems/information technology
Industry structure	Mature industry with high degree of industry consolidation among acute care, home health and physician offices and clinics.	Emerging industry with high degree of fragmentation and diversification. Large number of small firms in highly specialized niches from sofware to Internet publishing.
Pace of industry change	Constant but incremental change driven by insurance and capitation rates set by federal government and managed care.	Rapid and volatile change because of major changes in techology.
Skills standards and certification	Set by federal and state government. Entry and advancement based on satisfying state licensing requirements.	Set by the private sector. Entry and advancement based on satisfying certification requirements developed and administered by software makers and third-party organizations.
Match between education degree sector/job title	Good match between educational degree and job title. Different skill sets can be stressed and recruited for by employers based on changing industry needs.	Very weak match between educational degree and job title.
Implications for QUEST	**Training**: Relations with a few large employers capture knowledge of overall sector dynamics and trends, and future demand. Training content and skills mix more in line with future placements. **Placement**: QUEST can achieve economies of scale in placing multiple graduates in large health care firms.	**Training**: Difficult to forecast match between employer needs and skill sets. Knowledge of specific systems and software can be outmoded before graduation. **Placement**: Difficult to identify multiple placements with one employer.

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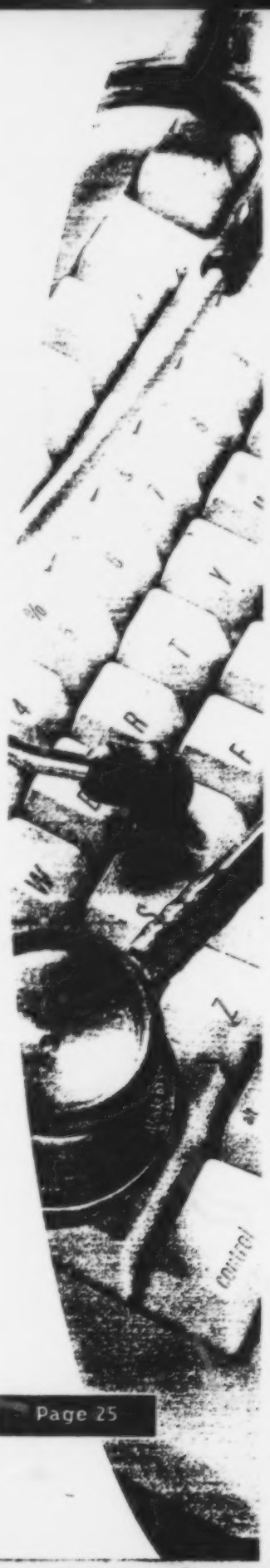
because large employers recruit for multiple slots with the same position description. For example, the Baptist Memorial Hospital system operates five hospitals in metropolitan San Antonio. It is not unusual for their nurse recruiter, Rosalinda Rios, to have more than 200 openings for registered nurses within the system. The management and hiring decisions of just this one organization can have large implications for QUEST.

In a sense, the concentration of jobs can both magnify the chances of training success and the risks of training failure. If occupational analysts and case managers have fostered good working relationships with a few key employers and tailored their training program to closely meet their current needs, then program graduates are likely to be hired. On the downside, if key employers should suddenly change their hiring practices in response to changing industry regulations, the entire training model may have to be overhauled, and current participants may find that the skills they just acquired are not relevant to the market.

The business systems and information technology sector presents QUEST with a different set of training and employment challenges. Unlike the health sector, the information technology sector is difficult to bracket and define because businesses of all types are becoming increasingly dependent on computers and telecommunications technology to operate competitively. The result is an increasing dispersion of information technology career opportunities across industry sectors as diverse as banking and manufacturing. This makes it difficult to track trends in employer hiring practices and skill demands. The "inside-the-loop knowledge" QUEST needs to identify job titles with living wages and career opportunities is more difficult to acquire than in the health sector because this knowledge is dispersed across many firms, and because skill requirements vary from sector to sector and job to job. Very few job titles are consistent across firms. Even when titles do sound similar, the associated duties and the related skill requirements can be vastly different.

Like the health sector, change is constant in the information technology industry, but the pace of change is accelerated because technology and technical skills can become obsolete within months. As a result of rapid change, demand forecasting and curriculum



design is problematic for QUEST's Occupational Development unit and their training partners at the community colleges. Perhaps more than in any other type of industry, individuals pursuing careers in the information technology industry must be committed to a process of lifelong learning and must be willing to update their skills continuously.

...Individuals pursuing careers in the information technology industry must be committed to a process of lifelong learning and must be willing to update their skills continuously.

Unlike the health sector, professional certifications for information technology qualifications are not administered or regulated by one entity. Private companies such as Microsoft, Cisco and Oracle set the certification standards for their own systems and software, and these standards in turn drive training curriculum and employer hiring standards.

The characteristics of the information technology industry have different implications for QUEST than those presented by the health sector. There are no economies of scale to be gained because the preponderance of small businesses and the dispersed nature of the industry make it hard to place multiple participants with the same employer. Job development and placement can begin to happen on a case-by-case basis, negating some of the presumed advantages of a systemic, sectoral approach to workforce development. On a positive note, the lack of industry cohesion and the broad range of employers that use information technology workers means that QUEST is likely to put continuous pressure on community college instructors and their own participants to keep the training curriculum and skill certification goals current. Occupational analysts must continuously solicit feedback and develop employer relationships that ensure they always have up-to-date knowledge. In effect, the odds are greater that a highly dispersed industry forces QUEST to adjust to the same continuous learning curve that it instructs its participants to embrace to further their own advancement opportunities.

We play the key role of asking employers, employees and educators to look beyond their immediate self interests and find areas of mutual interest that can be used as a force for change.

- Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

This section examines how QUEST puts its understanding of San Antonio's labor market trends and dynamics into practice to help the city's low-income residents access quality training and good jobs. QUEST's Occupational Development unit has the front-line responsibility for interacting with the city's employers. This section discusses services it offers to employers and educators; how it "gets smart" about sectoral trends and forecasts demand occupations; and how it works with employers and educators to shape training and education offerings in line with demand.

QUEST has often played a brokering role between key labor market actors and institutions including employers, employees, community colleges and local government. How QUEST has developed relationships with these different entities and the kinds of labor market changes that have resulted from QUEST's intervention are the subject of this section. In addition, questions surrounding the multiple sector strategy of QUEST also will be considered: How deeply involved in a sector does QUEST need to be so that it can be effective? What kinds of changes can QUEST influence in the local labor market?

The Occupational Development Unit

We target demand occupations. The city, state and federal governments all produce lists of demand occupations. But we do something that they do not. We actually go out and talk to the employers and ask them specifically what it is that they need — not just the job title, but the skills, the attitude.

—Project QUEST counselor

It is the Occupational Development unit's job to conduct labor market research that identifies industry-specific employment trends in San Antonio. Based on research findings, staff members make recommendations about the types of industry and occupational focus that QUEST should incorporate into its participant training portfolio.

This in-house unit engages in five principal types of work:[11]

- Analysis of long-term occupational trends in growing sectors of San Antonio economy;
- Development of employer relationships and job opportunities in selected industry sectors;
- Identification, assessment and/or development of training programs that prepare individuals for select demand occupations;
- Job placement assistance for QUEST participants; and
- Job retention assistance for QUEST participants.

Some aspects of the Occupational Development unit's responsibilities have shifted over the years depending on circumstances both within Project QUEST and in the larger labor market. Executive Director Peña explains, "There have been times at QUEST when we emphasized job placement over job development because that was where the greatest need was. We continued to have good relationships with companies, but ultimately we realized that without continued emphasis on analysis and job development, our ability to really help employers as well as participants was limited. Over time, we have come back to the basics. We understand that both development and placement functions are equally important to the ongoing success of the program."

Peña continues, "In the past, each Occupational Development unit staff member did all parts of the work — a placement specialist doubled as an analyst. Now we are separating the jobs of placement specialist and job analyst/developer. As the program has grown, we have divided the staff into specialized functions. We now have six staff members — a director, two job developers, a placement specialist, an occupational analyst and a recruiter. Each job is equally important to program success."

[11] Responsibilities excerpted from the Project QUEST Operations Manual (October 1997), with modifications based on discussions with current Occupational Development staff.

Staff Functions in the Occupational Development Unit

Occupational analysts: QUEST adds value to employers by being knowledgeable about the factors driving change in a sector that will ultimately have an impact on local hiring practices. Occupational analysts perform multiple tasks: They track state and national issues that impact local labor markets, contact employers about hiring needs and network with professional associations to understand their views on issues driving change.

Job developers: Job development follows from an analysis of demand occupations. Job developers assist QUEST's employer partners to overcome specific recruitment, hiring and retention issues within their firms. Job developers may work with employers to define the specific hard and soft skills required for jobs, as well as to articulate the possibilities and required competencies for advancing from entry-level to higher-paying jobs. The job development function also involves mediating between employers — who have specific needs for workers with defined skills and talents — and the community colleges, which provide occupational training. When necessary, job developers may facilitate the creation of new courses or curricula in line with market demand, or they may help shape existing curricula to ensure that graduates possess the job-ready competencies employers require.

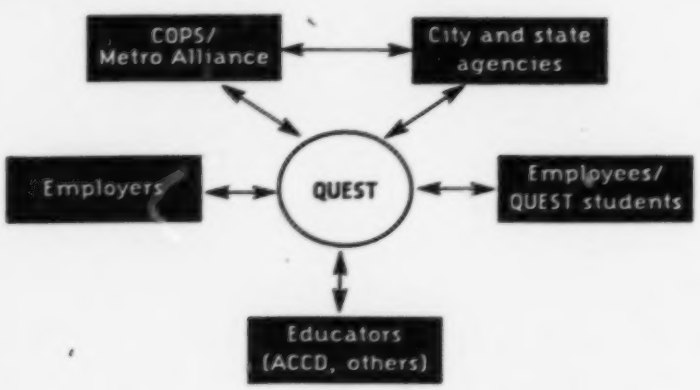
Placement specialists: Placement specialists begin working with Project QUEST participants 120 days before their scheduled graduation dates to discuss placement requirements and develop an individual placement plan. Review sessions are scheduled and coordinated with participants' Client Services counselors. Placement specialists will counsel participants about job applications and interviews, and assist them in the use of information on job openings.

Roles and Relationships of QUEST and Key Partners

In addition to the relationships cultivated by the Occupational Development unit, there are other critical linkages that QUEST depends on to achieve its mission. Figure 3.1 introduces QUEST, its primary customers, resource providers and public policy advocates. QUEST leverages local resources from different sources to perform its labor market matching function: It works with educators — primarily the Alamo Community College District (ACCD) – to shape and sometimes create course offerings to meet employer needs; and it works closely with COPS and Metro Alliance to maintain strong relationships with the mayor, the city council and the Department of Community Initiatives. These relationships — and the outcomes QUEST achieves — enable the organization to secure funds from city and state agencies to advance their economic and human development goals. COPS and Metro Alliance also play an important support role for Project QUEST by engaging in organizing and advocacy efforts aimed at increasing the amount of local resources that support long-term training programs serving the low-income communities of San Antonio. QUEST's central position underscores its role as a labor market intermediary.

QUEST leverages local resources from different sources to perform its labor market matching function.

Figure 3.1



QUEST and the Community College System — Working on the Supply Side

As mentioned in the industry section, a key issue facing San Antonio's city government is improving the quality of its labor force to attract and retain the desired mix of industry, and to generally enhance the quality of life for San Antonians. In approaching the twin goals of improving the quality of the workforce and improving opportunities for low-income individuals, QUEST saw that transforming the role of the community college system was the key element to success. QUEST's work with the ACCD enhanced the system's ability to work with low-income individuals who face multiple barriers in the labor market and provide training that is valued by employers and will lead to living-wage jobs for students who participate. By working to improve the job-relevance and accessibility of training at pubic educational institutions, Project QUEST's efforts not only benefit the program participants, but other students who enroll in the community college system.

Serving Non-Traditional Students

Project QUEST is a recruiting arm for things the ACCD does not do all that well. We do not have the money or the time to do what they do. If Project QUEST had not been here, my guess is that in many cases, the students they serve would not have been in college."

— Dr. Homer Hayes, dean of workforce development, ACCD

(The current system of remediation) is not the way that this college used to do remediation. It used to be just a teacher and a classroom. ... Project QUEST is not just a program. It is a change agent in the community.

— Dr. Federico Zaragoza, vice president of administration, St. Philip's College Southwest Campus

QUEST asks its participants to commit to a long-term training process because the long-term career and economic prospects afforded by a certificate or a degree are substantial. Most QUEST students are prepared to make the commitment and the associated sacrifices that come with it. However, for many, the process was proving too long. Every additional week or month a training pro-

gram continues represents a significant amount of foregone income for participants. In particular, students who needed remedial coursework to prepare for their chosen career track often found that fulfilling the prerequisites to their degree program took a year or more. During this time many students apply for and receive Pell grants and other types of educational subsidies that are available only for a limited amount of time (even though the reality is that students require financial assistance for the duration of their training). It is not only Project QUEST participants who need remedial coursework at the community college. According to Dr. Zaragoza, roughly 70 percent of students coming to the community college need some degree of remediation.

Advancing more quickly to occupation-specific coursework is more satisfying for students and improves their chances of staying in the program.

QUEST worked with the community college system to address this barrier, creating the Workforce Development Academy (WDA, described in Section 4, Training and Case Management Strategy). The WDA allowed students with ninth-grade reading and math levels to achieve the required 12th-grade competencies in 10 intensive weeks. Advancing more quickly to occupation-specific coursework is more satisfying for students and improves their chances of staying in the program. This system change is an improvement for any student who needs remedial work before beginning college-level classes, not just those served by Project QUEST.

Similarly, QUEST has worked with the ACCD on the timing and format of some of its career track courses. QUEST examines all the course requirements for a particular degree track it has targeted, and then reviews the timing of when these courses are offered to ensure that students are likely to be able to complete the courses within an acceptable time frame. In one case, QUEST worked with faculty and program administrators in the nursing program at St. Philip's College to open summer sessions of some core curriculum classes that previously had been offered only during the fall semester. Students who enrolled in these classes were able to graduate three months earlier than normal, thus enabling them to find work and begin earning wages much sooner.

QUEST also has worked with different ACCD programs to vary the timing of courses and to offer additional sections of core classes at night or in multiple weekly time slots to enable students

to maintain jobs or to meet family obligations. One of the issues QUEST is currently trying to resolve with the community college and area health care employers is the timing of courses in the new bridge program designed to train employed nursing assistants to become licensed vocational nurses (LVNs). Most nursing assistants work in shifts, so while some can attend classes in the morning, others can attend only in the evening. For the course to be successful and for employers to be able to participate, the class schedule must accommodate the changing work rosters of hospitals and nursing homes.

Developing Employer-Oriented Curricula

> *The Alamo Community College District has changed its mode of operation. We are now driven by industry just as Project QUEST would want us to be.*
>
> —Dr. Homer Hayes, dean of workforce development, ACCD

When Project QUEST first started working with the ACCD, it took a very involved role in curriculum development. A good example is the diesel mechanics program. Project QUEST found that there was local employer demand for diesel mechanics, and that these were relatively high-wage jobs. Yet employers had to recruit people outside of San Antonio or send people to a college in Waco for training because there was not an adequate local training program. Meanwhile, San Antonio had a community college equipped to offer this training, but the program was closing for lack of demand. Project QUEST worked with the college to completely revamp this curriculum, actually assigning a staff person to design the curriculum in consultation with local employers. The QUEST employee worked on-site at the college during this process. The college was willing to engage in this process because it was struggling to maintain its funding and needed to attract students. QUEST had the ability to attract students, offering to fill the new classes if they were appropriately designed and taught.

QUEST also has helped the community college system modify course offerings in response to changing needs. When QUEST began, there were few courses available for LVNs at the community college, but there were many openings at local hospitals. QUEST interviewed health sector employers and identified areas of short-

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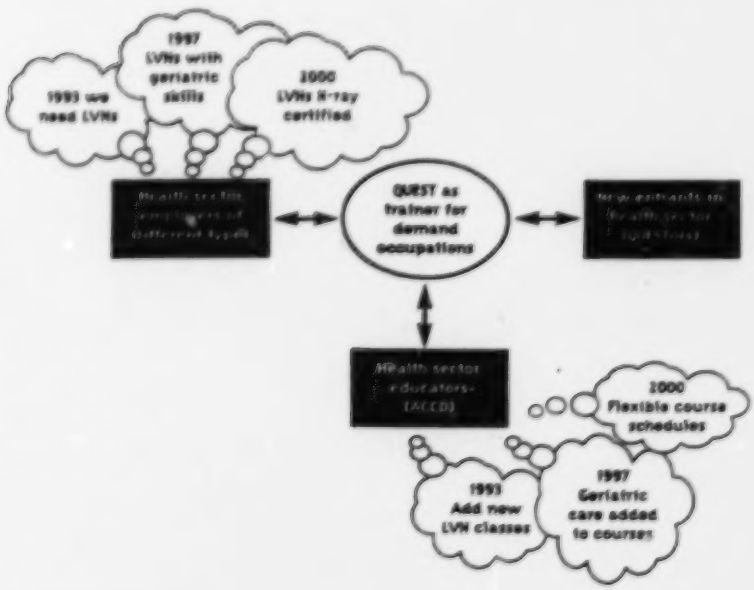
age. QUEST opened discussions with department chairs, deans and program managers at the community college. After several months, new classes were added to serve QUEST participants and the community at large.

In 1997, national trends toward managed care and changes in Medicare reimbursement policies led to decreased demand for LVNs. To cut costs, hospitals cut back on LVN hires and increased their dependence on nursing assistants who reported directly to registered nurses. QUEST assessed the situation, and part of the analysis focused on the growing demand for nursing homes and assisted living facilities in the Bexar County area. These facilities had a growing need for LVNs at a time when hospitals were cutting back on them. The shifting demand prompted QUEST to consult with the nursing program staff at St. Philip's College. As a result of QUEST's sector analysis and information sharing, the community college altered the LVN curriculum so that it integrated courses on geriatric care in line with changing demand.

Figure 3.2 QUEST's Role in Shaping Training



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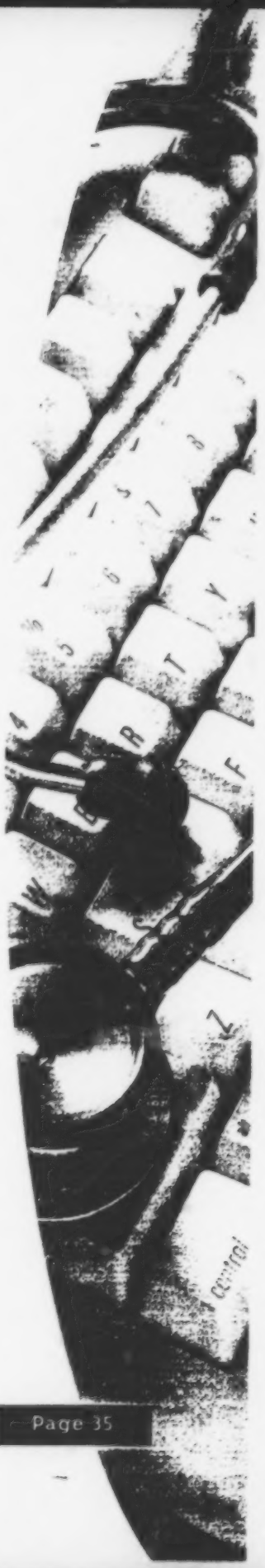
In a more general sense in the health sector, cost containment strategies have required health care providers to do more with less. Employers are looking for specialty health care personnel who can perform multiple functions – individuals who are "multi-modal." QUEST's response has been to invest in certification beyond the standard community college product, so graduates have the credentials and flexibility to respond to changes in employer demands.

> *Reimbursement goes down every year and our salaries go up four percent every year. Margins are slimming so we have to figure out how to make profits with fewer people. We cannot have a laboratory technician, an X-ray technician and an LVN anymore. The people in greatest demand will be multi-skilled individuals ... if an LVN is also certified in X-ray tech or in phlebotomy, she can earn $14 an hour when an LVN without can earn $10 to $11 an hour.*
>
> —Emil Friesenhahn, Quantam Medical Group

A key opening for Project QUEST came about two years after it started, when the leadership of the ACCD changed. This change in leadership offered QUEST the opportunity to change the way the college approached curriculum design on a broader level. QUEST staff members were reasonably quick to introduce themselves to the new management, and sought various opportunities to discuss their ideas for curriculum change and to explain their role in helping the college refine its curricula as well as their ability to bring students into the system. In its work on curricula such as the LVN program, QUEST not only reported what it learned about employers' needs to community college staff, but it also directly connected community college staff with employers, thus changing their method of operation. Instilling a more employer-oriented focus for their career training has been a major lasting change at the community college, a change catalyzed by Project QUEST. This change benefits not only Project QUEST participants, but all individuals who come to the community college for an education that will improve their career prospects.

The community college now conducts its own outreach to employers in designing curricula; QUEST no longer needs to fill this



function. QUEST continues to work with the community college system in new ways, however. It is currently developing a career mobility program to help working individuals enhance their skills and gain credentials that lead to promotions and higher pay. In this instance, QUEST is playing a brokering role among the ACCD, employers and incumbent workers.

Negotiating with Employers — Working on the Demand Side

> *You break into a company by starting with human resources persons. You get them to talk about what their needs are ... gradually, they begin to understand that we really are interested in the work that they do and the demands they face. We understand their interest in the bottom line, and we help them re-evaluate their investment in human resources within that context.*
>
> - Mary Peña, executive director, Project QUEST

In addition to working with the community college system on changes that ultimately result in a supply of better-trained workers for San Antonio's employers, QUEST also works with employers in ways that subtly shift their demand for workers. This aspect of QUEST's work is not guided so much by a strategic plan for a specific change in employer behavior, but results from the opportunities that arise for QUEST staff members as they engage with the employer community. However, QUEST would not have these opportunities to engage with employers regarding their human resources practices had it not first shown its ability to help employers meet their staffing needs. The resulting level of credibility accorded Project QUEST allows it to leverage opportunities for changing employer behaviors in ways that open up living-wage jobs to low-income people.

Essentially, to create changes in employer demand, QUEST first had to earn their trust. In addition, by understanding both employer needs and the barriers low-income individuals face, QUEST brings a fresh perspective to employers regarding human resource practices. This aspect of its work is best illustrated by example. Bexar Electric, a large regional electrical contractor, was having difficulty attracting qualified electrician helpers. QUEST worked with the company and the ACCD to design a customized

training course that would help Bexar fill this need, and would provide participants with a path toward becoming journey-level electricians. As part of this process, QUEST helped Bexar adjust some of its screening criteria. For example, Bexar required applicants to have a 12th-grade reading level. QUEST staff inquired about the true reading level needed – do entry-level employees need to be able to read technical documents, or do they need to be able to read the newspaper? Through this line of questioning, QUEST staff members were able to determine that a reading comprehension level of ninth grade or better would be sufficient for the job, and convinced Bexar to alter its requirements accordingly. Similarly, QUEST showed Bexar how requiring participants to have their own cars was an unnecessary barrier for entry-level employees, and this requirement was dropped. Working with Bexar on its hiring criteria changed prospects both for QUEST participants and for disadvantaged job seekers in general.

In another case, a major medical institution approached QUEST to provide training for medical records clerks. The wage that the employer proposed to pay these individuals, however, was below QUEST's standard for a living-wage job; therefore, QUEST was not willing to provide training for that occupation as defined. Instead, QUEST job developers worked with the employer to think about ways that new responsibilities might be added to the position so that the potential employee would be more productive and thus earn a higher wage. Eventually, the employer decided to combine two previously separate functions into one job, justifying a higher wage. QUEST then helped this employer recruit an appropriately trained workforce.

Employers, Employees and Educators — The Brokering Role

QUEST's recent involvement in developing a career mobility program for nursing assistants illustrates the role QUEST can play in bringing together employers, employees and educators to solve business problems and create better employment opportunities. The career mobility program will provide training to nursing assistants employed at different facilities in San Antonio that will enable them to become LVNs. To make the program work for all parties — employers, community colleges and participants — a number of

Health care is one of three industry sectors Project QUEST targets today.

challenges have to be overcome. QUEST has taken primary responsibility for working with each party to address needs and concerns and to push the project forward.

A main concern for employers relates to the long-term commitment of entry-level nursing assistant staff to the health care field. Are they willing to invest the time in training that will involve both nursing skills training and likely some remediation? Or will they leave the field entirely for slightly higher wages in the short term? The answers to these questions are critical for employers, who are reluctant to invest in training an entry-level workforce if it will not result in higher quality health care and reduce costly turnover.

Once employers are convinced that a number of their nursing assistants are truly interested in pursuing health care careers, and that developing a career ladder would enable them to retain good workers as they increase their skills, the program logistics need to be addressed. Are employers willing to adjust work schedules to enable existing employees to attend classes? Are they willing to provide tuition credits to help employees defray the cost of training? Will the timing and content of training adequately meet employers' needs?

One employer who has been involved in the formation of the new program is the Air Force Villages Assisted Living Facility. QUEST's Occupational Development unit contacted Marsha Lloyd, the facility's staff development manager, to see if she had any interest in participating in and helping to develop the program. Lloyd was familiar with QUEST and had previously referred some of her nursing assistants to the program for assistance in pursuing nursing credentials. "QUEST has provided some wonderful opportunities

for our employees," she explains. "Without the kind of assistance and guidance they offer, I think many of my employees would have never had this opportunity to get nursing qualifications."

Despite her appreciation for Project QUEST, the process of working together to create a mobility program has been difficult. There have been curriculum design issues and labored discussions between employers, QUEST and the nursing program at St. Philip's College to agree on the preparatory coursework needed to ensure that students are prepared for the LVN program. In addition, there were snags early on with the availability of classroom space and program slots. As Lloyd points out, timing in these matters is crucial:

> *Our facility is expanding. We have nursing assistants who want to advance to become LVNs before the new units are completed so they can apply for the new nursing positions being created. Our nursing staff is pretty stable for the most part. Knowing that, these women really feel the time crunch to get certified in order to qualify for the new positions. They are motivated right now to pursue further training. There are plenty of programs around that they could apply to, but I would much rather work with QUEST. We just need to find a way to make the timing work and to ensure that there will be enough program slots for our employees. QUEST is a wonderful program. I hope we can develop this initiative not only for our nursing assistants and us, but for the whole community.*

QUEST's negotiations with educators to develop the mobility program also have progressed in fits and starts. The issues raised with Karen Kimmel, St. Philip's program director for nursing, are difficult to address within the context of a traditional community college instruction framework. Is it possible to stretch a course from seven to 14 weeks, and offer it in both night and daytime slots? Is it possible to sequence the work/school hours so trainees can perform existing job duties, attend school and still have time left for their families? In QUEST's view, the questions posed to the community college present an opportunity to improve upon the core curriculum and make it more relevant to employer needs. For the community college, however, such questions must be addressed according to

traditional chains of administrative command. In addition, the request to teach courses at multiple times can create cost inefficiencies, and it is often difficult to find instructors willing or able to teach courses during non-traditional hours.

At the time of the study, QUEST's Occupational Development staff and consultant were in the final stages of negotiating a pilot mobility training program with 15 to 20 nursing assistants sponsored by employers who have expressed early interest in this problem-solving training effort. The expectation is that a successful pilot would encourage other employers to create mobility programs that provide incentives for their entry-level health care workers to obtain qualifications and advance their careers.

This creative initiative illustrates many the facets of QUEST: It differentiates QUEST from typical job placement agencies by its focus on filling future jobs and not just matching current needs with available candidates. It shows QUEST's flexibility in devising collaborative and creative responses to employer needs. Finally, it illustrates QUEST's stock in trade as effective brokers, even when the brokering process is complex and time-consuming. By sticking with the process and working to find solutions, QUEST continues to build its credibility with employers and educators, and is fostering change that benefits employers and entry-level workers.

Procedures here at QUEST are flexible. The emphasis is on fitting the resource to the student. When we give an employer a graduate, it gets someone who is self-sufficient 99 percent of the time. We have helped students succeed in school, and we have helped them figure out how to take care of their own problems.

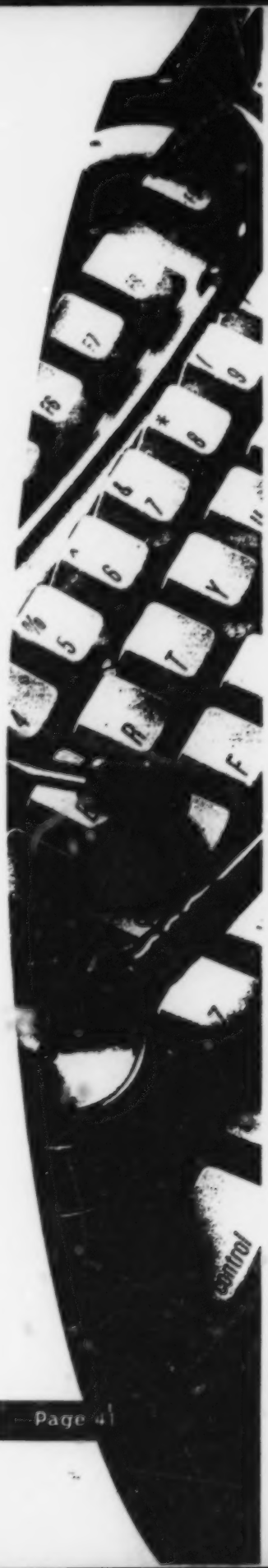
- Felipe Tamez, senior counselor, Project QUEST

The role Project QUEST plays in training individuals for careers is invaluable, and yet it can be difficult to grasp. On one hand, participants credit QUEST with helping them to acquire the resources, skills and confidence they need to move into jobs that pay well now and offer opportunities down the road. On the other hand, QUEST doesn't actually conduct any occupation-specific skills training. So if QUEST is not a training agent, what defines its training strategy?

The overall objective of QUEST's training and case management strategy is to connect the unemployed and working poor of San Antonio with the education and resources needed to obtain good jobs in targeted occupations. To do this, QUEST's Client Services unit integrates the research and recommendations from the Occupational Development team into a production strategy that generates motivated, reliable and competent program graduates that will be in high demand in the labor market.

The Client Services unit has the largest staff of all QUEST departments, currently 12 people working as counselors, case aides and intake specialists. As with job developers, each counselor specializes in a sector and a subset of demand occupations. Each counselor manages a caseload of between 45 and 60 students, and between one and four specific occupational training tracks. This means they work exclusively with participants who are enrolled in a particular career-track curriculum such as vocational nursing or computer programming.

The majority of training for QUEST participants is conducted by the community colleges in the Alamo Community College District (ACCD). As QUEST has learned more about its participants' skill needs, it has initiated a tiered set of training programs designed to move individuals along a skills continuum and into the college-level occupational training that leads to quality job opportunities.



Katrina's Story

Katrina is a 27-year-old African-American woman who lives in San Antonio with her three sons, ages 7, 5 and 2. Before enrolling in Project QUEST, Katrina spent a total of two years on welfare, and had worked at various times as a waitress and a telemarketer. The most any of these jobs paid was $6 per hour. She once enrolled in a training program to become a medical assistant, but quit because she was dissatisfied with the quality of the teachers and the information she was learning. Neither her high school diploma nor her work experience prior to QUEST equipped Katrina with the skills to get a job with good pay and advancement potential.

Katrina had no personal earnings in the year before enrolling in Project QUEST. For income, she relied on a combination of welfare, food stamps, housing subsidies and educational loans to make ends meet while she was in training to become a licensed vocational nurse (LVN). Her hope was that, after training, she would become self-sufficient and find a job that paid $9 per hour with benefits. "Project QUEST has helped me form real expectations about what I should get out of training and what to expect after training. They gave me information on how to look for a job and what to say in job interviews."

Katrina graduated from Project QUEST as an LVN 18 months after entering the program. She found an LVN position at a local nursing home less than a month after graduation. She has been employed steadily for more than a year, earning $12 per hour, working 32 hours per week and receiving all major benefits (health insurance, paid sick leave and vacation, life insurance and retirement benefits). Although her current employer does not offer education and training benefits, Katrina is already planning to return to school to become a registered nurse.

Getting participants work-ready is only one part of the Client Services strategy. The other, equally important job is to make

it possible for students to attend training in the first place. One of the most frequently asked questions about QUEST is how low-income individuals can afford to enroll in long-term training when the distant payoff does little to address current economic needs such as rent, food and child care. How do participants survive and make ends meet while fully engaged in a one- or two-year training process?

QUEST augments its training tiers with a comprehensive service strategy tailored to individual needs. All of QUEST's services are offered to all clients regardless of which training tier or training track they participate in. Below is a brief discussion of the Project QUEST "training package," followed by an overview of the enrollment process and a look at the training content and methodology involved with each tier.

Key Attributes of Project QUEST's Training Strategy

Subsidies and Services

Client Services works with participants to develop a package of "wrap-around" services to help them get through training. There are formal policies and definitions pertaining to what counselors/case managers can and cannot do, but the staff's self-defined mission is to do whatever possible in the way of intervention and support to help participants stay in school and complete training. Whether the issue relates to school, family, health, housing, transportation, work, domestic violence or any other stumbling block, the Client Services staff finds ways to leverage resources and obtain the needed services and support for participants.

As one counselor explains, "We are advocates for the student within the organization. So, for example, we have authority to help a participant with rent. Our policy says we pay 'x' amount. But reality is not how much we pay; it is how much the rent is, and does this person have enough to pay it? Depending on the circumstance, I may go in and request that we pay the full rent. You could not do that in most agencies. But any less than what a participant needs is not going to get him anywhere or solve any problems."

Long-term training — and its economic rewards — would be inaccessible to the population QUEST serves without financial assistance. The QUEST training strategy therefore incorporates support that covers the cost of tuition, books and necessary supplies (uniforms, lab equipment, notebooks, etc.). In addition, QUEST provides funds to subsidize private or public transportation so that participants can get to and from school. QUEST also pays for the cost of certification tests in fields such as nursing and computer networking and programming.

QUEST's tuition subsidies ease the burden of education costs, but there are still many financial pressures that can undermine a student's commitment to school. Financially strapped individuals know all too well that time in school is time that they are unable to earn an income or attend to family needs. Even if their tuition and school-related costs are covered, they must still manage all of the costs associated with day-to-day life. The solution: Make it as easy as possible for participants to concentrate on their studies and to stay in school by helping them locate, navigate and secure all of the myriad support services available.

Individualized Counseling

When an individual begins with Project QUEST, she is assigned to a case manager/ counselor who works with her to provide information, support and guidance. Counselors keep track of all of the myriad private and public assistance programs administered by local, state and federal entities. They strive to stay abreast of the complicated eligibility criteria for these services. With this knowledge and an understanding of each individual's circumstances, case managers are able to help participants design a support strategy that includes all of the services for which they are eligible, such as federal Pell grants, child care, food stamps, housing subsidies and Medicaid. The strategy is reminiscent of the "one-stop" system, except the goal is reversed: Rather than facilitate access to resources that help move an individual into work as soon as possible, QUEST streamlines access to resources to help a person hold off on (or minimize) work for the length of time it takes to earn a degree or certificate that will qualify her for a good job.

Jody's Story

Jody is 42 and lives with her 10-year-old daughter in San Antonio. She has been enrolled in QUEST's network administrator training program for 12 months. Because she has been in school full time, Jody has had no personal earnings in the past year. Subsidies and Pell grants totaling $14,700 have supported her family and her training. Before enrolling in QUEST, Jody had a high school diploma and worked at dozens of different jobs for short periods of time until getting a clerical job with benefits with the city's public services department. She held this job steadily for eight years while her wages rose incrementally from $5.15 to $9.50 per hour.

Although Jody's job was stable, she greatly disliked the work and was dissatisfied with her wage and the level of responsibility she was able to attain. Despite her unhappiness, she felt unable to make improvements in her work environment until she heard about Project QUEST. "I did not have anyone who would believe in me. I had problems and I received counseling. I did not have the means to go to school or work because of my child. I did not have money. I had no support. Project QUEST has provided these things for me."

Jody's goal following training was to find employment as a network administrator earning $12 per hour plus benefits. In fact, since graduating, Jody has worked through a temporary placement firm that has connected her with three different long-term assignments where she used her computer networking skills. The pay rate for these assignments ranged from $14 to $17 per hour. Jody feels that the diverse work experience and connections she has gained by working through a temporary agency has actually enhanced the value of her skills and certification as a network administrator and increased her ability to find a good, permanent job that matches her interests and temperament. She knows that her wages, the level of work responsibility and the opportunities she has for advancement in the information technology sector are much improved compared to what she was able to achieve previously as a clerical worker.

Counselors are well versed in their students' course curriculum, and they develop good working relationships with the instructors and program managers at the community college. Counselors also maintain close communications with the Occupational Development unit and stay abreast of developments within their students' occupational sectors. By their own assessment, they spend about 90 percent of their time directly interacting with, or advocating for, their students. The remaining 10 percent is spent on administrative duties. QUEST counselors emphasize that their job is to help students; however, help is provided in accordance with the Industrial Areas Foundation's "Iron Rule" — never do for people what they can do for themselves. Counselors impress upon their students the need to manage their own affairs and stay on top of financial, family and academic responsibilities.

Counselors impress upon their students the need to manage their own affairs and stay on top of financial, family and academic responsibilities.

QUEST Client Services

Regardless of which training tier or track participants are engaged in (customized training, normal college attendance, basic skills training), they receive financial subsidies, administrative assistance and counseling:

- Tuition, books, supplies and enrollment assistance. Participants use vouchers and college identification cards to purchase goods and services, and costs are billed to Project QUEST.
- Transportation subsidies.
- Child care: currently funded outside of Project QUEST's budget as a separate subsidy from the city. Subsidy pays for care during all times when the participant is in class or studying on campus.
- Other assistance as needed: rent, utilities, legal intervention. Assistance coordinated and offered through a combination of QUEST funds and existing social service programs such as San Antonio Housing Authority, Project WARM (utility costs), Legal Aid.
- Weekly group VIP sessions and individual meetings with counselor.

VIP Sessions

I thought I would dread VIPs. But now I actually look forward to them. VIPs boost your ego. Everyone is going through the same thing and people really know what you are talking about. That helps, because when I go home, nobody really understands what I am doing or how much work I have.

-Project QUEST student

My QUEST counselor helps teach us so many different kinds of things about life. We learn how to work with people at all different levels. We learn how personality plays into the equation — all sorts of things we would never learn if QUEST were just giving us financial aid. We learn how to interact with our peers and with authority.

-Project QUEST student

The primary strategy counselors use to teach participants about work performance, work ethics, self-esteem, study habits and other "soft skills" is the Vision, Initiative and Perseverance (VIP) session. Counselors and participants recognize VIP sessions as the defining feature of QUEST's service strategy. As one student explains, "They teach you things in the VIP that if you were just going to school, you wouldn't be taught. I would not be taught about self-esteem, or how to handle a job interview. But QUEST does a good job of helping us to understand the kinds of things that are going to affect us before, during and after our programs." A program director at one college where QUEST nursing students train comments, "Counselors work magic in those weekly VIP sessions to cheerlead, encourage, motivate. They know when to use a crying towel and when to use a boot, but it is always done with love and respect. I end up getting a better student because I have someone doing this for them on the outside."

VIP sessions provide the main structure and content that unifies the QUEST training experience regardless of which career or level of training participants are engaged in. Counselors use the hour-long weekly sessions to accomplish a variety of objectives. At first, they are an efficient way to relate important QUEST policy and procedural information to new participants. They also function as

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A QUEST Counselor Reflects on the Role of VIP Sessions

I always go into my VIPs with a lesson plan and an assignment, but I have learned that it is important to be ready to throw the lesson out the window if necessary and be attuned to wherever the students are that day. Last week, for example, the VIP became a problem-solving session for one student who was struggling in her clinical trials. Everybody in the group helped her work on her problem. They have been together more than a year now and some really lasting friendships have formed. Her colleagues were giving her confidence and critiquing her style in a way that they probably were not able to do in rounds or in a bigger group. They know she has kids, they know she is dealing with a difficult relationship; they know she is really smart and they know some of the reasons why her confidence is lacking. So their support and coaching is really direct and heartfelt and more effective than anything I could have said.

VIPs seem to help students stay motivated to stick with the program and get through the tough spots. Over time, you get to know so much about your students. They constantly amaze me. Everybody has their own unique skills and issues, so you cannot just say, "I have done it, so you can do it" because that is not really effective. You have to work with each student where they are and help them to realize their own capabilities, and learn for themselves every day to make the commitment to work, to study. You have to find out what motivates them.

It is a red flag for me when someone misses a VIP session. It means there is trouble either in school or at home and I know I need to get busy. My students' lives are riddled with different crises. One student just lost her house — she is a single mother with four kids and losing her house is going to be a big deal. Another student got divorced last week and is losing custody of her kids. But they both showed up here today. I think in some ways that what gets these people through the hard times now is their commitment to school and to building their own future. VIPs help them see a future. And school is the one place in life where they are having success, where they are making good on their own abilities. That is really the crux of what VIPs are meant to do for these folks.

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an effective way to build esprit de corps among new students and foster important peer-to-peer learning and mentoring opportunities. As the group coalesces and courses intensify, VIPs are used to help students develop school and life coping skills such as time management and financial planning.

As participants progress through training, counselors begin to work with QUEST's Occupational Development unit to increase the amount of VIP session content devoted to job preparation, job search and work skills development. In effect, the VIP morphs into a job match program when students are about three to four months from graduation. The blending of VIP and job search content is intended to facilitate a smoother transition for the student between the worlds of school and work. Time spent with occupational analysts and job developers also encourages participants to taper their reliance on their counselors and develop a habit of going to the Occupational Development staff with questions and ideas about employment career options.

Participant Responsibilities

> *In other (training) programs, the attitude was, "You need to take this job and this will be your job." They did not offer much support. But with Project QUEST, if you need help because you are not doing well, they are right there for you. They want to see you succeed and make good grades and do well. They are very supportive in seeing that you do succeed in reaching your goals.*
>
> -Project QUEST student

In exchange for all of the services and support QUEST provides to participants, the program requires that students commit to certain conditions upon enrolling in the program. In addition to making their coursework a top priority in their lives, QUEST requires students to provide regular feedback on progress and grades. Participants must give counselors weekly attendance sheets and grade reports from each class. In addition to these bookkeeping requirements, all QUEST students are required to attend the weekly VIP sessions. If they cannot attend, they must contact their counselor and, if required, schedule an individual meeting.

Upon graduation, students have an obligation to QUEST to seek employment in their field of specialization and with a company

based in San Antonio. QUEST asks that students commit to working locally within their field of expertise for at least two years after training. Linda Caraway, director of Client Services, explains the rationale: "We are candid with students and explain to them that the city of San Antonio is paying the majority of funding for their education. In return, the city wants to prosper. It is investing in students to go to school to get a certificate or a degree so that after graduation they can find a job, buy a home and spend money in San Antonio. That is how the city gets paid back."

QUEST asks that students commit to working locally within their field of expertise for at least two years after training.

Participant Commitments to QUEST

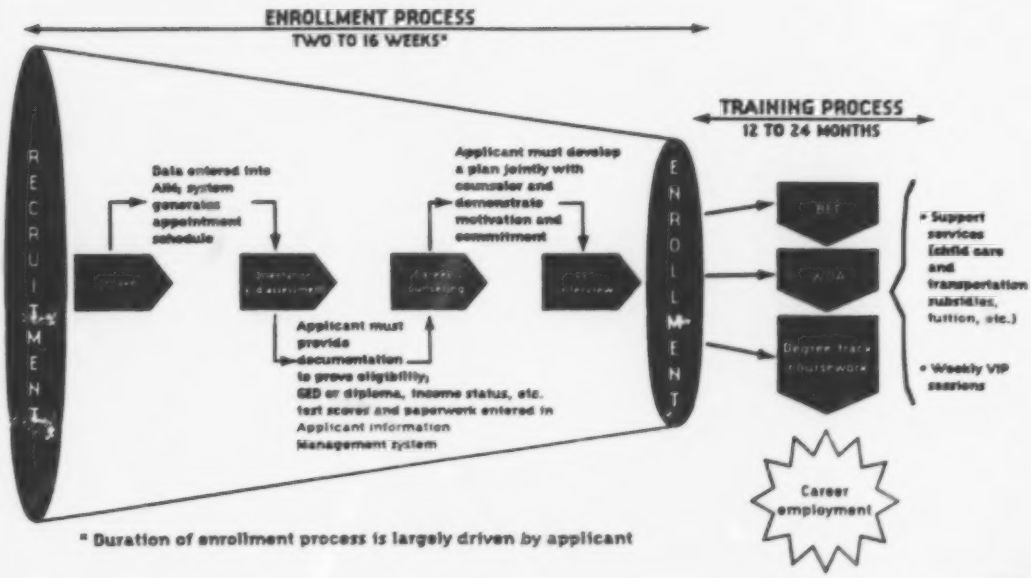
In return for QUEST's assistance, participants are asked to make the following commitments:

- Make school/training a priority – attend all classes, complete all coursework and give their best effort;
- Attend weekly VIP sessions;
- Report grades and attendance to case managers – no surprises at end of semester; and
- Seek and accept employment in San Antonio in the occupation for which they trained, and work in that field for at least two years.

Project QUEST has developed a rather extensive intake and enrollment process, the objective of which is two-fold. First, the inclusiveness of the recruitment and assessment process means QUEST encounters many more applicants than it can possibly serve. QUEST is reluctant to turn anyone away because it sees even a short interactive opportunity as a means for helping a low-skilled individual take the next step on his own continuum of progress. For those candidates who do meet QUEST's qualifications, the enrollment process continues to be quite extensive. Due to the long-term nature of the learning commitment, and the amount of money QUEST invests in its students, QUEST wants to ensure that participants are fully aware of what the program entails and what is required of them before they sign up.

The recruitment, assessment and enrollment process is described below and is depicted in Figure 4.1. On average, this entire process takes between two to 16 weeks.

Figure 4.1


ENROLLMENT PROCESS
TWO TO 16 WEEKS*
TRAINING PROCESS
12 TO 24 MONTHS
RECRUITMENT
Data entered into AIM; system generates appointment schedule
Applicant must develop a plan jointly with counselor and demonstrate motivation and commitment
ENROLLMENT
Applicant must provide documentation to prove eligibility; GED or diploma, income status, etc. test scores and paperwork entered in Applicant Information Management system
* Support services (child care and transportation subsidies, tuition, etc.)
* Weekly VIP sessions
Career employment

* Duration of enrollment process is largely driven by applicant

The Enrollment Process

Recruitment and Intake

During the current period of strong economic growth and low unemployment in San Antonio, recruiting low-income individuals to a long-term training program such as Project QUEST requires perseverance and the use of multiple strategies. QUEST's Applicant Information Management system shows that about one person in seven who applies to QUEST ends up enrolling. To meet its overall participant enrollment and service goals, QUEST places a great deal of emphasis on recruitment. The program currently receives more than 300 applications per month.

Leaders from COPS and Metro Alliance have traditionally done much of the recruiting for Project QUEST through outreach centers at various member churches. COPS and Metro Alliance want to ensure that people in their own churches and communities benefit from the opportunities provided by Project QUEST, so they often stuff fliers into church bulletins and speak at Sunday services

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to advertise the training opportunities QUEST provides. They also want to ensure that the individuals who apply to Project QUEST have a clear understanding of the community's expectations for program participants and of the personal level of commitment required to complete the program.

In 1998, QUEST hired a full-time staff member to coordinate and amplify volunteer recruitment efforts. The recruiter, Valentina Arevalo, represents QUEST at career fairs in the San Antonio area. Arevalo also appears on a weekly bilingual radio show to discuss the local labor market and announce job training opportunities with Project QUEST. The executive director and all other QUEST staff also make frequent appearances and speeches at schools and clubs around the city to promote the program. Staff members also go out in groups and as individuals to canvass neighborhoods with fliers about the program.

Another recruitment source for new applicants is the referral process. Counselors and the recruiter are continuously contacting housing organizations, food banks, literacy centers and other types of agencies to describe QUEST's services and forge relationships that make mutual referrals possible.

Current and former QUEST participants also are strong recruiters for the program as they discuss their training experiences with peers and family members. Some of these new recruits are already in college, but they are frequently on the verge of dropping out because of a lack of finances or child care. Recruiting at the community colleges is not generally promoted, however, because QUEST wants to ensure that recruitment efforts are primarily reaching the city's more disadvantaged populations.

No prescreening takes place during recruitment, and every person who completes an application is given an appointment to come to Project QUEST for an initial interview, orientation and skills assessment, regardless of whether they would qualify for services. The application information is entered into the Applicant Information Management system, and the system automatically schedules appointment times and helps counselors organize their schedules efficiently. Among other things, the system documents and maintains a record of staff members' notes about their meetings with applicants.

Orientation and Assessment

When applicants come to QUEST for their first appointment, they receive an overview of QUEST's history and training strategy. Then they are given the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to measure their reading comprehension, spelling and math skill levels. Until 1999, QUEST did not have the capacity to serve applicants who scored below a ninth-grade level on the test. This is changing, and a pilot project is under way to accept applicants scoring at sixth-grade skill levels and above.

The System Assessment for Group Evaluation (SAGE) is the other test administered during an applicant's first visit to QUEST. This includes a battery of tests designed to evaluate an individual's aptitude in areas such as general learning; verbal and numerical ability; motor coordination; spatial and form perception; and manual dexterity.

All applicants who complete assessments are invited to return to QUEST to discuss their results. Counselors use the test results to gain insight into an applicant's strong and weak suits, and to help an applicant think through and decide upon a career path. The TABE results also are important for placing qualified applicants in the correct training tier.

If an applicant's skill levels and other assessment criteria qualify her for QUEST's services, the post-assessment meeting marks the beginning of collaboration with a QUEST counselor to design an Individualized Service Strategy (ISS) addressing training and service needs. If assessment indicates that an applicant is not ready to enter QUEST's program, the counselor will use the post-assessment meeting to review alternative strategies and agencies that can help that person improve upon his current skill or earnings situation. Counselors may refer unqualified applicants to the Literacy Central Referral Center for GED classes or English as a Second Language training. Referrals also are made to the Texas Rehabilitation Center or the Texas Workforce Commission.

QUEST encourages the applicants it cannot enroll to reapply once they have resolved the issue or issues that kept them from qualifying. In an effort to follow up on referrals and increase the likelihood of reapplication, QUEST recently created the position of "success advocate." It is the success advocate's job to get back in

touch with people two to four weeks after their QUEST interview to see how they are progressing and to encourage them to keep in touch and return to QUEST for assistance at a later date.

Applicants whose aptitude, skill level and other qualifying criteria are in accordance with QUEST's entry requirements, and whose career interests can be matched to the training that QUEST subsidizes, meet with their counselor one to three more times to complete their Individualized Service Strategy. This involves an inventory of the applicant's financial situation and completion of a determination of need worksheet. The counselor helps the applicant assess needs and goals, and to prepare a plan for moving forward with training and employment. Applicants may be referred to other agencies to apply for support from programs such as food stamps or financial aid. Such referrals are within the context of QUEST's program, however, and a QUEST counselor assists the applicant in navigating the process.

The Participant Evaluation Team collectively determines whether the applicant is prepared for the commitment to one to two years of higher education.

When the paperwork is completed, the applicant returns to QUEST for a final pre-enrollment interview with the Participant Evaluation Team, or PET. The PET consists of an applicant's primary counselor, the director of Client Services and the director of Occupational Development. The meeting is structured as a formal interview, and the applicant is questioned about her Individualized Service Strategy; her interest in and knowledge of the occupation she seeks to train for; her personal life and any conflicts or issues that might create distractions from study; and other relevant issues. The PET collectively determines whether the applicant is prepared for the commitment to one to two years of higher education.

If the applicant demonstrates the qualities it takes to succeed in the program, her ISS is sent to the executive director with a PET recommendation and a request for final approval and admittance into Project QUEST. The counselor then assists the new participant with enrollment and registration procedures at the appropriate training provider, and instructs the participant on how to purchase required books and supplies with QUEST resources. Other subsidies such as transportation stipends and child care also begin once the

participant attends classes in any of the tiers or training tracks outlined below.

All public institutions of higher education in Texas require entering students to have their reading, writing and math skills comprehensively assessed according to the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). Students who do poorly on the assessment may still enroll in vocational programs such as licensed vocational nursing or office systems technician. However, without remedial training, many end up repeating courses, thus slowing progress toward certification. A student enrolling in any degree-track course such as the associate's degree in registered nursing or computer programming is required to perform satisfactorily on the TASP to enroll in program-related coursework.

All QUEST students have GEDs or high school diplomas, but TABE scores, which are recorded in the Applicant Information Management system, may show an applicant's actual skills are far below a 12th-grade level and too low to meet TASP requirements. A skill deficit means added time and expense to complete training. While participants cannot afford the extra time and discouragement, QUEST cannot afford the extra expense of these setbacks. The problem prompted QUEST to work with the ACCD — and eventually with other training partners — to introduce sequential tiers of instruction that develop participants' skills from sixth- to 12th-grade levels and prepare their skills and outlook to succeed in advanced training and employment venues.

Workforce Development Academy (WDA)

The first tier of basic training QUEST developed was the Workforce Development Academy, which began in 1994 and is housed at St. Philip's College in San Antonio. WDA is designed specifically to help raise the reading, writing and math skill levels of students from a ninth-grade level to a 12th-grade level over the course of 10 weeks. In 1999, 49 percent of QUEST's participants (262 students) were enrolled in WDA.

In contrast to the ACCD's traditional approach to remediation, WDA is a full-time, intensive basic skills training course that incorporates career-related content; group classroom instruction; individual and group tutoring sessions; and self-paced, computer-aided instruction. QUEST calls WDA "college prep," not remediation. Students attend class for six hours a day, five days a week for 10 weeks. Weekly assessments measure participants' overall performance and improvement in reading, writing and math skills. Individuals who struggle are given additional one-on-one attention. If, at the end of the 10-week session, someone is still not passing Texas Academic Skills Program standards, they may remain in WDA for part or all of an additional course.

Workforce Development Academy Highlights

- Partnership between Project QUEST and the Alamo Community College District
- Designed to upgrade reading, writing and math skills from ninth- to 12th-grade level
- Full-time, 10-week intensive college prep readies students for vocational coursework or Texas Academic Skills Program test (TASP)
- Classroom instruction, one-on-one and group tutoring, computer-aided learning
- VIP student development sessions
- Upon completion, student moves into career-track courses at local community colleges
- Full support provided by Project QUEST (supplies, child care, transportation, tuition)

WDA classes are coupled with weekly VIP sessions that prepare students to deal with the demands and expectations of college. VIPs and class work also focus students on the end goal of career employment by infusing lectures with job preparation information and by using assignments to build students' knowledge of the occupations and industries they seek to enter. The course is so successful that St. Philip's and the ACCD now offer WDA as a course option to all incoming students who need basic skills training. The majority of WDA students, however, continue to be QUEST participants.

Basic Education Training (BET)

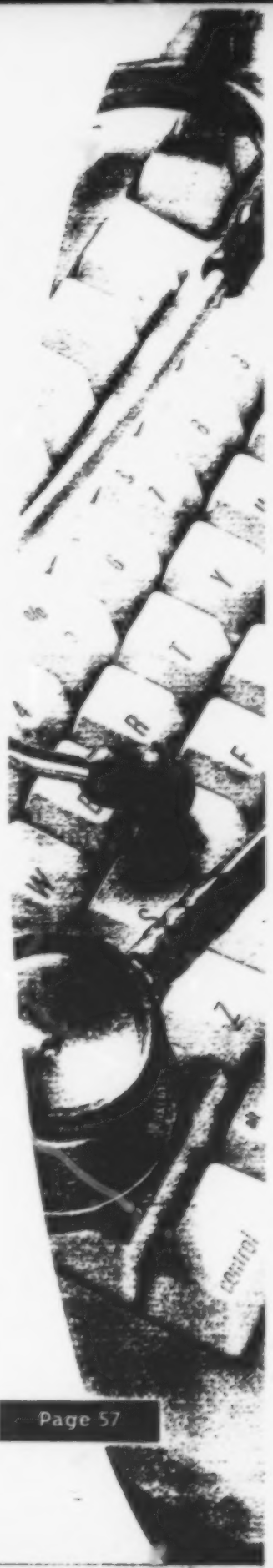
There was a population out there that, because of us stopping at the ninth-grade level, we weren't serving. It is not that they have not been coming to us all along. We just did not have the capacity to take them on as participants. Our previous way of handling (applicants) when they would score low on our assessments was to refer them out to literacy programs. But we started hearing back that retention in these programs was not good, and that students were not receiving the necessary individualized training. We figured at this rate these people would never show up back at our doors again, and that what they really needed to succeed was the extra handholding and support services that QUEST provides so well.

-Linda Caraway, director of Client Services

BET (Basic Education Training) is a new training initiative that enables QUEST to reach deeper into San Antonio's disadvantaged population to directly assist individuals with more extreme skill deficiencies. The program was developed in collaboration with San Antonio Learning Centers and is currently being piloted in two centers in the city. To qualify for the program, participants must have a high school diploma or a GED, but their skills as tested with the TABE can be as low as sixth-grade level.

Basic Education Training Highlights

- Partnership between Project QUEST and San Antonio Learning Centers
- Designed to upgrade reading, writing and math skills from sixth- to ninth-grade level
- Part-time, eight-week, self-paced classes ready students for the Workforce Development Academy and the Texas Academic Skills Program test (TASP)
- Classroom instruction, one-on-one and group tutoring, computer-aided learning
- Instructor is QUEST employee who also acts as counselor and case manager to students
- Full support provided by Project QUEST (supplies, child care, transportation, tuition)



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The BET program consists of eight weeks of classes, five days per week, for two hours a day. Half of the time is spent in a classroom format improving reading comprehension and math skills through traditional means. Students spend the other part of their time in self-paced learning exercises in a computer lab using a computerized learning package called Plato. Participants also practice retaking the TABE and learning critical test-taking and time-management skills. Students who need more than eight weeks to make significant improvement may repeat the course to raise their score above ninth-grade reading and math levels on the TABE. During this time QUEST provides its full range of support services, including child care and transportation subsidies. These supports appear to play a critical role in enabling participants to stick with the program.

BET is the first of QUEST's training tiers taught by a QUEST employee. The instructor is responsible for curriculum development and instruction, and she partners with a counselor who performs the VIPs and other support functions for the participant. As yet, no outcomes are available to measure the success of BET.

QUEST recognizes diversity among its participants and sponsors what in effect amounts to professionally tiered training opportunities to accommodate different aptitudes, employment goals and time constraints among its participants.

Associate's Degree and Certificate Programs

The whole purpose of WDA and BET is to prepare students academically and emotionally to enter and succeed in college-level training. QUEST recognizes diversity among its participants and sponsors what in effect amounts to professionally tiered training opportunities to accommodate different aptitudes, employment goals and time constraints among its participants. QUEST currently sponsors its participants to train for one of 16 occupations within four industry sectors. Each of these courses is developed and administered by individual faculties and departments at an ACCD-affiliated college.

Participants who want to enroll in associate's degree programs must meet the pre-requisite requirements set forth by the department and must directly apply and be admitted by the relevant faculty. Registered nurse, computer network administrator and computer programmer are currently the three associate's degrees for which QUEST sponsors training. The rest of QUEST's career tracks

involve completion of a one-year technical certificate. About 48 percent of QUEST participants engage in training for employment in the health services sector (this includes participants who are involved in the customized training course to become dialysis technicians). Twenty-six percent enroll in business systems and information technology-related training programs. The remaining clients are evenly spread between technical courses related to maintenance and repair, and service technology.

Health Sector Occupations

Demand occupation	Qualifications	Training time	Starting hourly wage
Registered nurse	• Associate's degree • State board certification	Two+ years	$13 to $15
Vocational nurse	• Certificate of completion • State board certification	One+ years	$9 to $12
Nursing aide *(not sponsored by QUEST)*	• State board-approved application	One semester (five classes)	$6 to $8

QUEST's Client Services unit does not usually try to change or influence course curriculum. QUEST counselors will get involved in curriculum matters only if they observe something or hear from students regarding the quality of a course or an instructor. Counselors share this information with the Occupational Development unit. It is that unit's job to ensure that QUEST's partnership with community colleges provides students with a quality education, marketable skills and employment opportunities. (Section 3 on Implementing A Sector Approach explains this role in more detail.) In general, the main requirement QUEST imposes on training has less to do with curriculum than with employment outcomes: As a rule, QUEST will not train for any occupation that pays less than $8.50 per hour, includes benefits and offers advancement opportunities.

Once participants enroll in degree- or certificate-track pro-

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grams, there are no observable distinctions between them and the non-QUEST students with whom they share the classroom. Instructors are likely to know that they have QUEST students in class only when students self-identify, and when they request a teacher's signature on grade and attendance reports. QUEST counselors do not seek any special treatment for their students, but they do find it helpful to establish good working relationships with instructors. For the most part, counselors will not intervene with an instructor or a department on behalf of a student. It is more likely that a counselor will work with a student to help her figure out ways to solve her own problems with a teacher or a department's administration.

Achieving Outcomes Despite Adversity

Sometimes a QUEST participant may be unable to continue with her original training plan because her economic or domestic situation changes and short-term needs become overwhelming. In these cases, QUEST counselors may work with the student and the faculty to see if there are opportunities to reroute into shorter or less demanding training tracks.

For example, a student who originally begins a two-year associate's degree in registered nursing may be able to handle the intensive coursework because she and her children are living with relatives. If her living situation changes and she needs to generate more income to pay rent, she may become unable to continue to devote all of her effort to her courses. Her QUEST counselor might work with her to identify other training options that will suit her new needs.

Some students may opt to transfer into the one-year licensed vocational nurse training program. Counselors might also help students do some creative thinking about ways to cultivate a new support network so that they can continue to study. In the worst-case scenario, a student may opt to withdraw completely from training. Her counselor will lobby hard for her to apply only for a short-term leave-of-absence. This strategy is still risky (the student may never return to school for the education she needs to succeed), but it does buy some time and help the participant. It also encourages her to continue to self-identify as a student, thus increasing the chances she will return to the program and to QUEST to complete her training.

Customized Training and Mobility Programs

QUEST has recently experimented with shorter-term, customized, employer-specific training programs. QUEST entered into a joint venture with Bexar Electric, a large regional electrical contractor, and the ACCD, to train eligible individuals to be electrician helpers. This 26-week course was designed as the entry-level track in a four-year apprentice training leading to journey-level skills. QUEST also entered into a venture with Fresenius Medical Care, a large integrated renal health care company, to train dialysis technicians for its clinics in San Antonio. The work/study program is designed for 13 to16 weeks depending on the skills and aptitudes of the participants. Most of the participants in this program are former welfare recipients. Given the "work first" nature of welfare reform, such participants did not have any real option to enroll in a long-term occupational training program. The customized approach is therefore a new way for QUEST to reach out to disadvantaged members of San Antonio's communities who are not able to participate in its traditional training tracks.

QUEST also is partnering with the St. Philip's College School of Nursing and local hospitals to design a mobility program that would enable nursing assistants employed at Baptist Memorial Hospital and at other facilities in San Antonio to gain the skills and training necessary to become licensed vocational nurses. A similar curriculum bridge is being developed to help LVNs become certified as registered nurses. The assistant-to-LVN bridge program has just begun with its first class of students. The program demonstrates QUEST's commitment to building an employment and training continuum that reaches in both directions from the program's original focus to maximize the population it can serve.

Transitioning to Work

As QUEST students complete their coursework and prepare for new jobs, QUEST underwrites the cost of industry and state licensing exams that award credentials and formalize participants' academic qualifications. In the information technology sector, QUEST will pay for up to five separate software and network certifications, including A+ certification. In health care, QUEST pays for students' registered nurse and licensed vocational nurse state board examinations. When it was discovered that some students were not

Participants can train in Project QUEST's heating, ventilation and air conditioning career track.

taking their certifying exams because of the expense of traveling to the test site in Austin, QUEST began to coordinate and subsidize transportation to and from the exams.

Project QUEST continues to provide financial subsidies such as transportation and child care for 30 days after a participant has been placed in a job, thus easing the transition from training to work.

QUEST recognizes their students' academic accomplishments in a formal graduation ceremony held separately from the official college ceremony (although graduates can attend both). These ceremonies are attended by various college personnel as well as COPS and Metro Alliance volunteers; the full QUEST staff; participants' families; other QUESTors, business leaders and government officials. The high visibility and emotion of QUEST graduations puts all of the effort and accomplishment into a profoundly positive light that helps maintain and build local support for QUEST.

Project QUEST continues to provide financial subsidies such as transportation and child care for 30 days after a participant has been placed in a job, thus easing the transition from training to work. QUEST will continue to provide support for participants beyond this 30-day window as needed. If a participant loses her job or is unhappy with her place of employment, the Occupational Development unit is responsible for helping her to find another job as rapidly as possible, preferably in the profession for which she has been trained. Job developers and counselors work together to try to keep up with students for at least six months beyond graduation to offer assistance, provide support and record wage and employment retention data for management and oversight purposes.

QUEST would like to maintain formal contact with students for up to one year following graduation to improve the quality and detail of wage and employment retention data in the system. Longer-term follow-up relations also would increase QUEST's labor market knowledge and service provision. To pursue this goal, the QUEST success advocate is now trying to collect employment and wage data for QUEST participants who have either graduated or left the program within the previous year.

During the years, Project QUEST has developed a sophisticated management information system to track a variety of program- and participant-related outcomes and information. This section first reviews the outcome and cost data that the Applicant Information Management (AIM) system generates. It then presents a few examples of ways QUEST staff members have used the system to organize work and set program priorities.

Outcome Measures

QUEST tracks a variety of participant performance measures for both internal and external purposes. Internally, staff members use the data collected about participant demographics, aptitude and work history — along with program completion rates, training costs, employment placement and retention wages — to inform and direct their work. Selected outcome measures also are used to report the program's effectiveness to existing and potential funders, collaborating partners, researchers and other interested parties.

As noted in the Overview of this case study, the city of San Antonio is Project QUEST's primary funder. This unusual local funding relationship has prompted QUEST to develop and track some uncommon performance measures in an effort to ensure and expand this ongoing source of support. For example, as QUEST's board of directors and local program supporters push for it to scale up the program's training capacity, QUEST has found it useful to track the city council voting districts that applicants and participants come from. The logic is that to garner full support for Project QUEST from all council members, it is necessary to demonstrate that individuals from each district are directly benefiting from QUEST's services. Table 5.1 describes the major data inputs and performance indicators that QUEST's system tracks for participants and program applicants.

Data for all participants, regardless of their training tier or training track, is entered into the same database. But for reporting and management purposes, QUEST slices the data in different ways. QUEST finds it useful to monitor the outcome data separately for participants in the traditional and basic skills training tiers. By tracking outcomes for different training tiers separately, the Client Services and Occupational Development units can monitor the effec-

tiveness of their services for these different target groups. If there are significant differences in any of the outcome trends between groups, it signals staff members that they may need to rethink a service strategy or a particular type of intervention.

Table 5.1 Project QUEST AIM Data and Performance Indicators

	Participant characteristics	Training and client services data	Employment-related data
DATA INPUTS	• Sex • Age • Race/ethnicity • Marital status • Children • Education • Work history • Income history • Skills assessment scores • Receipt of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and other services • San Antonio council district	• Training tier placement • Tuition subsidies • Pell grant receipt • Non-tuition subsidies • Grade and attendance records • Dates of program entry/exit Graduation/completion • Counseling notes	• Name of employer • Position title • Starting wage • Benefits receipt • Placement within 90 days of training completion • Placement through QUEST staff assistance or on own • Retention after 90 days on job • Wage at 90 days • Other advancement data (*i.e. participant advances to four-year degree, other training related to career*)
PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	Data collected helps staff and funders determine if QUEST is indeed reaching the economically disadvantaged population it seeks to serve. Also indicates the geographic areas from which applicants come from Demographics highlight trends in the types of non-financial barriers to employment facing applicants and participants	• Enrollment rates • In-program retention rates • Completion rates • Training duration • Direct training costs • Client support service costs • Percent of participants receiving supports and subsidies Each of the above also can be broken down by occupational training track and/or tier of training, and by any of the demographic characteristics	Data related to employment serve as direct indicators of program performance. In addition, the following calculations can be made: • Job placement rates • Percent of placements in targeted industry/occupation • Best/worst sectors and occupations for participant placement • Average starting wages • Percent of jobs offering benefits • Primary employers • Return on investment calculations

Certificate and Degree-Related Performance Outcomes

Table 5.2 outlines participation, termination, job placement and hourly wage rates for both graduates and non-graduates of QUEST's traditional (non-remedial) training tier during fiscal years 1997 through 1999. Unlike many programs, QUEST expends the effort to follow up on employment and earnings outcomes for its non-graduates as well as its graduates. The information gives the staff a way to check whether training completion results in better outcomes for participants than would otherwise be the case.

Table 5.2 QUEST Traditional Program Participants

Graduation, Placement, Wages and retention (1997-1999)

	1999*	1998	1997
Total participants served	320	374	365
Number of terminations	250	352	361
Graduates	168	263	265
Average months enrolled	16.9	16.1	18
Graduation rate (as percent of terminations)	67.2%	74.7%	73.4%
Graduates placed in jobs	151	219	219
Placement rate (as percent of graduates)	89.8%	83.2%	82.6%
Average hourly wage at placement	$10.12	$10.38	$10.01
Ninety-day retention rate at original job	82.1%	86.9%	89.1%
Non-graduates	82	89	96
Average months enrolled	15.9	16.7	16.5
Non-graduates placed in jobs	27	33	30
Placement rate (as percent of non-graduates)	32.9%	37.0%	31.2%
Average hourly wage at placement	$9.50	$8.38	$7.36
Number of non-graduates still working at 90 days	78.5%	90.9%	80%

**Calculations are based on data collected in 12-month cycles ending in June of each year. For 1999, the data recorded here goes through March and thus accounts for only 10 months of activity. Graduation, termination, employment and other measures will likely improve as more participants graduate in May and June.*

The data also can be compared to see if there are any glaring demographic or other differences between those who finish and those who do not. Note that the average length of training time for non-graduates is not substantially different from that of graduates, and that both average more than 15 months of training. Counselors confirm what the

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data reveals — the majority of student loss occurs toward the end of the program leading up to final exams and graduation. Counselors recalled many instances where students have missed exams or left the program because of domestic violence. It seems common for a male spouse or boyfriend to feel threatened and become disruptive or violent when he realizes that his partner will out-earn him and be independent. In other cases, it is the student's own fears and self-sabotage that contribute to an eleventh-hour dropout trend.

Students who struggle academically and have to repeat classes also are prone to dropping out after an extended amount of time. Course repetition and lack of advancement may frustrate them beyond measure, or they may begin to feel that the profession for which they are training is not a good match after all.

Another surprisingly similar outcome shared between employed graduates and non-graduates is a very high 90-day job retention rate. Given the amount of exposure both groups have had to VIP sessions that cultivate self-esteem, accountability and soft skills, these on-par job retention rates may be partially attributable to program interventions.

Comparing the hourly wage data, it is clear that graduates earn higher wages than employed non-graduates after leaving Project QUEST. But the yearly averages seen in Table 5.2 mask some of the wage variation that goes along with QUEST's strategy to train in multiple sectors and occupations. When wages are broken down by occupation, we see that graduates' earnings compare favorably to the industry and occupational starting wages recorded in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Sample of QUEST Graduates' Placement Wages by Occupation and Industry

Career track	Number of placements	Starting hourly wage	Industry benchmark*
Computer operator	1	$13.58	$13
Computer programmer	4	$11.24	$13.40
Computer technician	1	$9.50	$11
Data entry technician	1	$12.00	$13
Licensed vocational nurse	139	$9.73	$9.62
Medical secretary	11	$7.63	NA
Network administrator	18	$11.87	$20
Office systems specialist	35	$7.66	NA
Registered nurse	79	$13.46	$14.40

**From the U.S. Department of Labor's 1998 Occupational Handbook, which reflects national averages. Information technology and registered nurse statistics reflect starting salaries for those with bachelor's degrees rather than associate's degrees, so averages will be higher.*

Workforce Development Academy Performance Outcomes

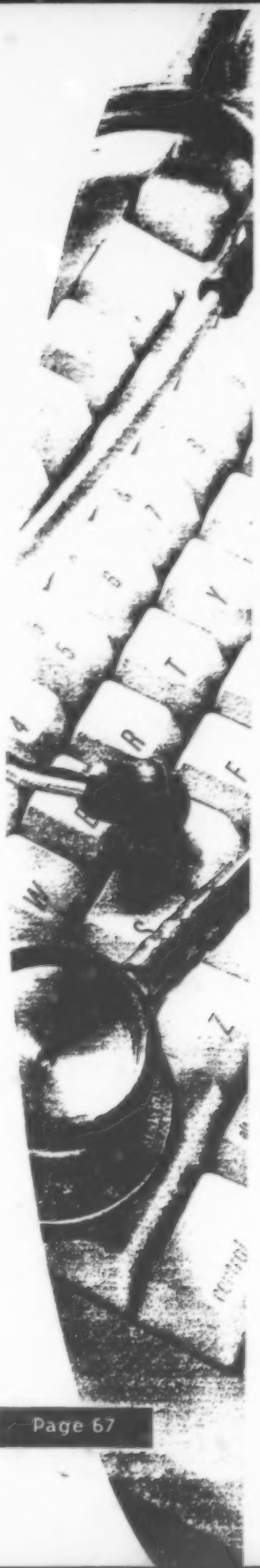
Outcomes for Workforce Development Academy (WDA) participants are tracked separately so that QUEST can monitor the progress of these participants to determine if WDA is helping to increase the success of participants with remediation needs. Although WDA is the beginning of coursework for these participants, the outcomes represent their experience following through to termination (positive or negative) from sector-track training.

Enrollment in WDA has expanded steadily during the past three years. Graduation rates for WDA participants, however, remain extremely low. As counselors and job developers learn more about working with this target group of individuals, refinements continue to be made to improve the quality of the program and the likelihood that participants will graduate. For the percentage of participants who do graduate, the three years of performance data indicate that the length of total training time has decreased by five months.

Table 5.4 QUEST Workforce Development Academy Participants Graduation, Placement, Wages and Retention (1997-1999)

	1999*	1998	1997
Total participants served	262	199	96
Number of terminations	194	160	87
Graduates	58	51	32
As percentage of all terminations	29.9%	31.8%	36.7%
Average months enrolled	21.3	24.5	26.4
Percentage placed in jobs	72.4%	90.2%	93.7%
Average placement wage	$8.97	$8.74	$8.22
Retention rate at 90 days	100%	100%	NA
Non-graduates	136	109	55
As percentage of all terminations	70.1%	68.1%	63.2%
Average months enrolled	13.9	15.9	14.4
Percentage placed in jobs	18.3%	20.1%	29%
Average placement wage	$7.29	$7.15	$6.79
Retention rate at 90 days	70%	100%	100%

**Calculations are based on data collected in 12-month cycles ending in June of each year. For 1999, the data accounts for only 10 months of activity.*



Placement wages have increased annually for both WDA graduates and non-graduates. Although the placement wages of WDA graduates are lower than those of QUEST participants who did not need remediation, they are still significantly higher than those of WDA non-graduates.

QUEST staff members point out that in addition to low basic skill levels, WDA participants are often the ones who are least able to afford time away from working. Even with the fast-track nature of WDA compared to traditional remediation, participants may still be frustrated that it takes too long to achieve training goals or see the fruits of their labor.

The BET program is still in a pilot phase, as is customized training for dialysis care technicians. Therefore, there is no outcome data available yet for either of these programs.

Training Costs

QUEST directly pays student tuition at the community college, although in some cases students' Pell grants may be used to defray these costs. Often, however, QUEST will allow students who receive Pell grants to use them for other basic needs, thus incurring the tuition cost for that student. QUEST staff members estimate that the program pays roughly 90 percent of tuition costs for students directly. It should be noted, however, that community college tuition by no means covers all of the costs of training. Community college systems have complex cost structures and a variety of expenses not found in most training programs. The income generated by tuition and fees accounts for only one-third of the Alamo Community College District's total budget. The remaining two-thirds comes from local, state and federal government sources as well as some self-generated income through investments and services.

Given this structure, QUEST's budget does not reflect the costs of training so much as the wrap-around services that enable participants to make it through training. This line item, however, accounts for only 18 percent of the average amount QUEST spends per participant.

QUEST provides long-term training, with participants averaging more than 17 months in the program. There are numerous times during the year when students may be beginning or completing

training. Therefore, one cannot merely look at the total annual budget for a year and divide by the number of participants to calculate the cost per participant, given the fact that for most participants, costs are not contained within one fiscal year. QUEST therefore estimates its monthly cost per participant and multiplies this number by the average number of months in the program to arrive at an average per participant cost. QUEST's AIM system allows program staff to know exactly how much was spent in direct costs for each individual participant. To calculate indirect costs, staff members aggregate the amount spent on indirect services each month and divide by the number of clients served in that month. By combining these two figures, QUEST arrives at an average monthly cost per participant.

Direct costs include tuition and fees; child care; books and supplies; transportation; utilities, clothing and grooming; and other needed expenses. While students are told when they enter the program that there are limits to the amount of financial support QUEST can offer them directly while in training, these limits may be evaluated on an individual basis if the need appears great. Staff members work with students to develop action plans so that the students will find the resources to support themselves while in training. At the same time, they do not want to see a student leave the program because she could not pay a month's rent. In total, direct costs account for 49 percent of the total cost per participant. The largest item is tuition, at 18 percent, followed closely by child care, at 17 percent. Books and supplies are the third-largest component of direct expenses, accounting for 8 percent of total costs.

Indirect expenses include costs that QUEST terms direct training costs, training-related costs and administrative expenses. Direct training expenses include the costs of providing counseling and case management services to students, essentially the costs of services that are provided directly to the students. Training-related expenses include the costs of occupational development — the research on occupational trends necessary to ensure that QUEST is always training for jobs that pay a living wage and are in demand, and the networking that ensures QUEST staff know who to contact to help students find jobs once they have completed training. Administrative expenses include the typical costs for accounting,

support services and other needed functions. Costs for occupancy, utilities and equipment are allocated across these three areas according to an estimate of each area's usage. Table 5.5 shows the calculated total cost per participant, and how this cost breaks down into the components discussed above.

Table 5.5 Project Quest's Costs Per Participant
July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999

Number of participants 582

Monthly costs	Dollars	% of total
Tuition and fees	72	18%
Child care	68	17%
Books and supplies	32	8%
Transportation	20	5%
Other	7	2%
Total direct costs	**$ 199**	**49%**
Direct training	88	22%
Training-related	38	9%
Administrative	78	19%
Total indirect costs	**$ 204**	**51%**
Average monthly total	$ 403	100%
Average annual total *(=monthly total x 12 months)*	$ 4,836	
Average total cost per participant *(=monthly total x 17.7 months)*	$ 7,133	

Project QUEST's costs per participant will vary over time. Staff members identified a number of factors that contribute to this fluctuation. First, the financial status and needs of participant groups vary somewhat from year to year. For example, one can see above that child care is a substantial cost. This is because QUEST serves a large number of single mothers, and many of them need help paying for child care to stay in school. If the number of women with many children is high in any given year, this expense will be high. If there are fewer women with children or the average number of children per single parent declines, so will the costs. In the 1999-2000 fiscal year, QUEST found a way to control costs by working with the city to get child care expenses covered through a separate program and funding stream.

Another reason for variation in year-to-year spending has to do with the career tracks students choose and the general mix of program offerings. For example, training to become a licensed vocational nurse requires only one year in school, while the registered nursing program takes two years. If more students choose two-year programs such as registered nursing or computer programming, the average cost per participant rises. Rising participant costs could be offset if QUEST continues to incorporate a variety of experimental, shorter-term training programs into its portfolio. For example, QUEST worked with a local high school on a bridge program, which provided three months of training to high school students to help them transition into college credit courses. Because participation does not require paying tuition to the community college, costs per participant are lower. While the addition of less expensive programs may lower the cost per participant in Project QUEST, it will not affect the average cost per graduate, because Project QUEST considers individuals as graduates only if they complete a long-term training program that prepares them for a career.

To calculate costs per graduate, QUEST employs a process similar to the one used for participants. QUEST looks at the costs incurred while participants who graduated were in training. Their direct costs are calculated exactly and their indirect costs are estimated. This method allows QUEST to determine how much was spent on graduates as a group. An alternative method, in which the total training budget is divided by the number of graduates, includes the costs of expenses for non-graduates in the cost per graduate calculation. Thus, this latter calculation would give a cost estimate of how much resources need to be devoted to training per expected graduate, assuming that the ratio of non-graduates to graduates remains constant. QUEST's method, on the other hand, allows a comparison of resource use between all participants, and those who graduate. As expected, the cost per graduate is higher. The main reason is that graduates remain in the program longer, 19 months on average, while the participant population in general remains in the program an average of 17.7 months. In addition, QUEST found that the average monthly cost per graduate was somewhat higher than per participant cost for fiscal year 1998-1999. However, there is no reason to expect that this will always be the case.

Similarly, QUEST calculates a per placement cost based on the actual direct expenses incurred by the group of individuals placed that year and an estimate of the indirect costs that should be attributed to that group. Table 5.6 shows the estimates for cost per graduate and per placement for Project QUEST in fiscal year 1998-99.

Table 5.6 Project QUEST's Costs Per Graduate and Placement
July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999

	Graduates	Placements
Number of participants	137	147
Monthly costs		
Tuition and Fees	$ 75	$ 80
Child care	83	63
Books and supplies	37	37
Transportation	28	26
Other	8	8
Total direct costs	$ 231	$ 214
Direct training	82	82
Training-related	38	38
Administrative	75	76
Total direct costs	$ 195	$ 196
Average monthly total	$ 426	$ 410
Average annual total (monthly x12)	$ 5,112	$ 4,920
Average cost per graduate/placement	$ 8,094	$ 6,847

Using Data to Manage

AIM was developed at Project QUEST by Arthur Mazuca, Information Services director, and has evolved along with the program's information needs. The in-house development and oversight of the system, and the continuity in AIM management, has been a great asset to Project QUEST. While there are immediate benefits in having a database specialist as a member of the staff, other benefits also are worth noting. Full-time availability of technical assistance means staff members have learned how to use AIM on a daily basis in a variety of ways to support each other in their jobs. Staff also are invited to contribute to the system, and in so doing have developed a sense of ownership. This ownership has, in turn, generated a program-wide sense of accountability for the system's accuracy. As one counselor explained, "If it's not in the system, then it didn't happen."

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For example, counselors keep notes in the system of their discussions with participants. If one counselor is unavailable to meet with a student, another can call up the notes and know what issues are of current concern. The system also prevents any participant or applicant from "playing the system" by going to different counselors until they get an answer they want. All QUEST counselors can call up notes regarding any applicant or participant. If a former applicant returns to QUEST to request enrollment and speaks with someone different, the notes highlight the issues that prevented enrollment in the first place, and the counselor can check that those issues have been resolved.

AIM also has allowed certain functions to be automated. For example, it is integrated with a master calendar that all QUEST employees use to schedule their time. Once the basic application information is entered into the system, it can generate a series of interview dates for an applicant and automatically schedule counselors' time to fit into their existing workload. The system also can generate vouchers and procurement orders for students to use to obtain supplies, uniforms and books. When counselors determine that a participant is eligible for assistance from another service agency in San Antonio, they can use AIM to create a referral sheet that outlines all of the critical information necessary for the student to take to the other agency.

In addition to the ways that the AIM system helps structure and maintain the daily work environment at QUEST, the system's data also has informed some of the strategic directions that QUEST has expanded into in recent years. For example, QUEST maintains the assessment scores of all applicants in the system. Therefore, it was possible to determine the percentage of applicants who were applying to QUEST with below ninth-grade reading and math levels. This information sparked discussions at Project QUEST that led to the creation of the Basic Education Training tier. Data collection was key to making the decision to assist this previously overlooked group.

Another example involves the city's new enrollment target for QUEST. As the organization expands to serve increasing numbers of participants each year to meet the performance goals tied to city funding, AIM will allow staff to track progress and inform

recruitment strategies. As QUEST expands its service area to include all districts of the city, AIM will store information that can provide critical insights into the effectiveness of the program's scale-up strategies.

Political Support

Organizing efforts by two strong community organizations in San Antonio—COPS and Metro Alliance—were the impetus for the formation of Project QUEST. Thus the organization arose because of political pressure developed through organizing efforts in low-income communities served by COPS and Metro Alliance leaders. COPS and Metro Alliance continue to cultivate political support for Project QUEST's activities, and QUEST also has tried to develop political support for its work through its relationships with key business leaders. The support of the business community is most likely attributed to the fact that QUEST makes clear to businesses that they are valued customers: Project QUEST expects its services to be of use to local businesses just as much as it expects to be of use to low-income workers. By treating local businesses as important clients, QUEST gained the support of the business community, and was able to attract and retain prominent local business people on its board of directors who also communicate with local government leaders on behalf of the program.

This combination of strong support from the local business community and from two powerful community-based organizations has helped Project QUEST maintain its high positive profile in the San Antonio community. As the program initiates a major expansion phase that will reach across all of San Antonio's neighborhoods, however, it is critical that QUEST begin building its own capacity to communicate with government representatives and the public.

Flexible Funding

Strong political support has been instrumental to continued funding from San Antonio's mayor and city council. The majority of Project QUEST's funds come from local government funds that are appropriated by the council and dispersed to the program through the Department of Community Initiatives. Local support and funding have given Project QUEST stability and freedom to design systems and deliver services tailored to the needs of the community, but that do not duplicate the services offered by others. Thus, for example, if an individual needs help paying heating bills, he may be referred to an organization that provides people with money for that purpose. If this same individual needs help paying his rent, however,

Project QUEST may provide that directly because there is not another organization that can help. In addition, Project QUEST may help some of its participants with child care, while others may be eligible for assistance from another organization because they currently receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families aid or other public income support. While the city does demand accountability, and requires Project QUEST to report performance outcomes, there are few restrictions on how QUEST achieves those outcomes.

This flexible funding arrangement that serves QUEST — and allows QUEST to serve — so effectively is in marked contrast to the conditions placed on monies received from other government funding streams such as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). In fact, while Project QUEST did receive funding in earlier years under the Job Training Partnership Act (replaced in 1998 by WIA), it has chosen not to apply for WIA funds in recent years, mainly because such funds cannot be applied to the costs of long-term training if a person is capable of finding any type of employment without additional training. Through outcome tracking, QUEST can demonstrate that the job quality and economic returns to its approach to training are notably stronger than other types of less-intensive approaches. Local support and unconventional funding streams are the keys to QUEST's ability to do its work.

Leadership Transitions

Since its inception, Project QUEST has had three executive directors, all of whom have been strong and effective leaders. The transitions between these leaders have been facilitated by the initial development of strong management systems. QUEST has an excellent management information system that is integrated into the work of many staff people. Thus, information about current operations is captured and stored in such a way that it does not disappear when a particular individual leaves. In addition, job descriptions are well defined and staff members are clear about their roles. Project QUEST management always has believed it is important to attract high-quality professional staff to the organization, and that to do that, it needs to pay accordingly. Just as Project QUEST does not want employers to hire its graduates based solely on appeal to their social conscience, it does not want its staff to consider their jobs as charity. By developing strong staff and strong management

systems, Project QUEST has been able to weather changes in leadership, and has developed new leaders from within its existing staff.

Customized Services

QUEST is designed around a core process that involves assessing an individual's interest in a particular career track, guiding the individual through a course of study relevant to that career track, and matching the individual with an appropriate job opportunity. Certain elements of the process, such as initial assessment, selection of a degree track, participation in the VIPs and job placement, are common to all. Other elements, such as more intensive counseling, transportation money, emergency rent assistance or remedial education services, might be added depending upon the needs of the client. This ability to take a standard procedure and customize it is a direct result of the flexible funding described above, and it ensures that services meet the specific needs of individuals and enable staff members to serve multiple individuals efficiently. Much of this efficiency relies on the underlying management information system through which client data is collected and progress is monitored. This system of organizing individualized services around a particular core service delivery mechanism should prove helpful to QUEST as the organization seeks to achieve greater scale.

Building to Scale

One of the challenges ahead for Project QUEST will be the degree to which it can rely on its established methods of service delivery as it seeks to serve greater numbers of individuals. While Project QUEST is stepping up recruitment, the organization also is considering new lines of services. For example, the organization is developing a method of working with incumbent workers and their employers to upgrade skills, provide career paths for low-wage workers and meet employers' needs for higher skilled workers. While this avenue of expansion seems promising, it represents a different way of working compared to the traditional QUEST model of service, and new issues arise. These issues include determining how much training time should be paid work time; how employees can balance work, school and family responsibilities; how employers can maintain their operations while their employees receive training;

and other concerns. Such issues may put QUEST in a whole new role of mediating between employers and their current workforce. In addition, Project QUEST has considered working with individuals who are pursuing a four-year college degree, as well as with individuals who need more intensive remedial services. Expanding up and down the educational spectrum also will bring new organizational challenges. For example, at present, Project QUEST considers only individuals who complete a degree or certificate program as graduates. Individuals who improve their basic skills and are able to get a better job, but did not finish a program, are not considered graduates. Project QUEST will have to consider whether and how it should modify its approach to performance tracking if it begins working with individuals whose needs for remedial education are greater than those of the population it currently serves.

Project QUEST faces many challenges as it increases its scale and scope, but the program appears to be well positioned to take on these challenges. Due to the high quality of service that the organization has provided both to low-income individuals and to employers, it enjoys an excellent reputation and high levels of public support. Project QUEST has built strong partnerships with a number of organizations, most importantly the Alamo Community College District, that have been instrumental to the organization's success thus far and will continue to play important roles as QUEST seeks to expand its services. And finally, QUEST has developed strong management and organizational systems and a professional, mission-oriented organizational culture, assets that should continue to support the organization as it meets the challenges ahead.

Achieving Systemic Change

Many workforce development and job training programs define success as helping individuals find work. This outcome also is a major aspect of success for QUEST and other sector programs. Sector practitioners go on, however, to explain that success also is about influencing some type of systemic or structural change in the way a specific industry operates in relation to disadvantaged individuals, so that the benefits reach beyond the participants and employers who are immediately involved in the program and perpetuate even if the organization ceases to operate. As QUEST's interventions span multiple industries, so does its efforts to create

permanent, systemic changes that improve skill building and work opportunities. Its intervention in multiple sectors and its brokering role with various institutional partners create opportunities to achieve systemic change with respect to the region's wider workforce system. One "systems change" achievement involves the creation of the Workforce Development Academy within the community college system. Another example of systems change within the community college system is the way the institution has internalized some of the lessons and activities that QUEST performed in the early years. As a result, the community colleges have increased their own inclination and capacity to engage employers in curriculum design, which improves the quality of education and training for all students.

Perhaps the biggest systems change intervention is one that is only beginning to develop. If it succeeds, however, it will create opportunities to enhance skill-building efforts not only in San Antonio, but also in cities and towns across Texas. The intervention involves creating a human development fund from revenues generated through collection of a .5 percent local sales tax. The fund would be dedicated to helping low-income and low-skilled residents enroll in quality training programs (such as Project QUEST) that would prepare them for skilled, well-paid employment. The initiative is being led by the two community organizations that founded Project QUEST — COPS and Metro Alliance. Project QUEST's success, however, is the impetus for the initiative and supplies the evidence that COPS and Metro Alliance are counting on to persuade local decisionmakers, the public and employers that the human development fund would be a good investment in securing San Antonio's economic future.

Under a 1989 revision to the Texas Development Corporation Act of 1979, Texas voters were given the option of imposing a local sales tax of up to .5 percent to help finance community economic development efforts.[12] COPS and Metro Alliance led an effort in 1999 to petition the San Antonio City Council to include a referendum on a local human development tax. However, when conducting background research, they found that the definition of economic development projects that the law supported did not reference job training, job retention or job creation, nor did it mention

[12] *Texas Taxes*, a publication of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, May 2000.

educational facilities. To proceed, the state law had to be amended to include workforce development efforts. Over the course of a year, COPS and Metro Alliance leaders and their partners succeeded in getting enough political support in the Texas Legislature to modify the law. The path is now paved for San Antonio workforce training advocates to again build support for a referendum on the human development fund in the fall of 2001.

This process illustrates the wide-reaching impact that sector and systemic approaches to workforce development can have. By working through the legislative process, this effort has created the opportunity for any municipality in the state of Texas to create its own sustainable revenue streams for job training and job creation.

Utilizing Sector Principles

While most successful sectoral programs are effective because of their unwavering focus and depth in one specific industry and occupation, QUEST demonstrates that sectoral strategies also are highly effective when used to inform regional approaches to workforce development.

Like other sectoral programs, Project QUEST sought out and identified ways to take advantage of industry trends for the benefit of San Antonio's disadvantaged population. It carefully researched local employer dynamics, hired industry experts, developed staff members' ability to think outside the box, cultivated employer relationships and convened groups of employers around key issues. Unlike other programs, however, QUEST did not focus narrowly on one industry, but rather focused on multiple industries vital to San Antonio's current and future economic stability.

The worker supply and demand problems — and opportunities — that define San Antonio's labor market result from systemic shifts and changing skill needs between industries. These same labor market transformations are occurring in urban and rural areas around the country. Project QUEST provides a powerful testament to the types of outcomes that can be achieved when local stakeholders use sectoral strategies to align workforce and economic development agendas through partnership and sustained commitments to human development.

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ONE DUPONT CIRCLE, NW
SUITE 700
WASHINGTON, DC 20036

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